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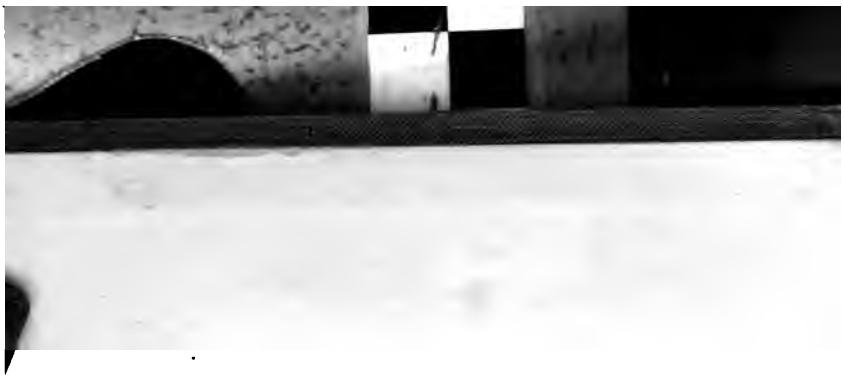
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Aunt Hetty

AUNT HULDAH

PROPRIETOR *of* THE WAGON-TIRE
HOUSE AND GENIAL PHILOSOPHER
of THE CATTLE COUNTRY

By
GRACE MAC GOWAN COOKE
and
ALICE MAC GOWAN

LONDON
HODDER AND STOUGHTON
27 PATERNOSTER ROW
1904



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"Oh! tell me a tale of the airly days—
Of the times as they ust to be;
'Piller of Fire,' and 'Shakespeare's Plays'
Is a'most too deep fer me!
Tell of the things jest like they wuz—
They don't need no excuse!
Don't tetch 'em up like the poet does,
Till they're all too fine fer use!"



TO THE MEMORY OF A MOTHER
WHOSE BENEVOLENCE WAS
AS BOUNDLESS AS
HULDAH'S
OWN

*



PREFACE

The whole story of Huldah Sarvice and her life in the cattle country of the West is a plea for the better understanding of a little understood, and now vanishing, class.

The desperado—who, after all, is a man like yourselves, gentlemen, pleased by what pleases you, saddened by what you find depressing, chasing with your own eagerness your own phantom, *happiness*—has long been regarded as an animal allied to man, but belonging to a variation of the species.

These characters are, as Huldah herself continually calls them, "pore babies, pore little ign'ant chil'en. Ef they knowed better they'd do better," urges this gentle monitor. And she concludes: "Law, yes! they must be punished—a child has ter be spanked sometimes; but they ain't no joy in punishin' 'em."

The literary material drawn from our Western cattle country has heretofore concerned itself almost wholly with the strenuous aspect of that life. But reflection must show that where there

are men and women, birth and death, the cooking and the eating of three meals in each twenty-four hours, the resigning of the body to that glimpse of Nirvana which we call sleep, the rising from it to greet a new day and a new round of petty happenings, there must be much of the simple domestic life common to all mankind.

If the readers of this book shall be brought to feel that a man may keep a saloon, be a gambler, and, remaining reprehensible in these particulars, have commendable and lovable qualities; that even a stage-robber may have his virtues, its author will be content.

The stream rises, the stream falls—a stream. You, who are its surface, may continue to cry out upon the dregs that they are vile; yet both go to make the stream, and each must partake of the nature of the other.

As for Huldah—and many another like her—the pastoral West builds no monuments as yet; and it is hoped that this account of her good works may in some measure fill the lack.

THE AUTHORS.

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HULDAH

CHAPTER I.

ORPHANTS

Sing, O barren, thou that didst not bear; break forth into singing, and cry aloud . . . for more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife, saith the Lord. Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thine habitations: spare not, lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes.

—ISAIAH.

Blowout had almost blown itself out. There was a sandy wind patrolling its streets and paths that kept all living things out of them.

Aunt Huldah Sarvice came to the door of the little frame shack where she kept an eating-house, dubbed by the cowboys the Wagon-Tire House, because of her custom of pounding on a wagon-tire, instead of a gong, to call her boarders to meals. Aunt Huldah was frankly wiping her eyes.

"She's gone, pore soul," she said, in reply to

the inquiry of a freckled-faced twelve-year-old girl who came hurrying up the straggling street with a small lard-bucket in her hand.

"Dead, Aunt Huldy?" asked the child, in a hushed, awed voice.

The woman nodded.

"She's been dead 'bout ten minutes. I was afeared she'd go before you got back. Did you send the word to Miz' Carter?"

"Yes'm. Billy said she was comin' in town to-day, anyhow, an' he'd let her know."

The child was inside the house now, untying her slat sunbonnet, and setting away the precious pail of milk which had come too late for the invalid, but which must be preserved for the baby. She sheered abruptly from the bed where the covered figure lay, to the cradle in which the baby slept. Edging down the sheet with tender stealth, she looked fondly at its tiny dimpled prettiness.

"Oh, Aunt Huldy! It's ourn now, ain't it? Of course, I ain't glad that its pore ma is dead; but if she had to die, w'y, it's good that 'twas here, where we could get the baby for ourn, ain't it?"

From the bed, where she was preparing the mother for her last appearance in the world, Aunt Huldah replied.

"Narcissy," she said softly—the girl knew that when her full name was used something serious,

and probably something disappointing, was coming—"Narcissy, honey, 'twas the baby that I sent to Miz' Carter about. I don't feel that 'twould be right fer us to keep him, ef we can do better fer him. And Miz' Carter, she's rich, you know, and childless—ef a childless person ever could be called rich," she added in an undertone.

Huldah Sarvice was, herself, a childless woman, though she would have laughed you to scorn if you had told her so. Widowed ere she was twenty-five, having seen her two little children drowned with her husband, while she stood helpless to save, she had turned her one talent to account and ever since kept a humble eating-house in one little town or another of the Texas cattle country. In the remote frontier communities of that day—it was in the early eighties—no provision was made for children orphaned by death or desertion. These are so few in proportion to the population, that some ranchman's wife is usually found willing to take care of them. But to Aunt Huldah, keeping always some sort of stopping-place known as the Wagon-Tire House, wherever she set up her belongings, such children naturally came. There had been many beside her present brood of six. Narcissa, the eldest, was her dependence—a pathetic, old-faced little soul, as capable as one of the child-mothers in a ten-

ement district. Aunt Huldah could have found a home for Narcissa "any day in the week," as she phrased it; but it would have been as a servant, and she had offended several influential persons by briefly refusing this.

The other children had been sent out of the house with Gess and Tell, the twins, because Aunt Huldah thought them too young to look upon that mystery of rebirth which we fear under the name of death.

The little girl was silent so long that Aunt Huldah—her mind far afield with this poor mother who had left the baby and gone upon her last journey—had forgotten all about her.

"Aunt Huldy," the child said suddenly, "it's just like Troy Gilbert said: you go and hunt up homes for all the pretty children, an' the nice children, an' you jest keep the old ugly ones—like me—that nobody'll have."

"Did Troy Gilbert say that?" asked Aunt Huldah, turning a startled face over her shoulder. "Well, he ought to be ashamed of hisself!"

"Oh, I wasn't mad," Sissy replied. "I know I'm ugly; it was true. And he said that he was willin' to give money—him an' all the boys—to help keep up your Orphants' Home, as he called it; but he swan he didn't want to be supportin' a museum of freaks."

"Well, I'll speak to Troy about that!"

"Aunt Huldy, Aunt Huldy!" the little girl burst out passionately, "don't give the baby away! They's only six of us; an' I can work as good as a growed woman. Gess an' Tell—they—they's good-hearted, really—an' they're goin' to learn to work. 'An' don't you remember how little Ally takes keer of the baby—oh, don't give him away!"

Three months before this day, the woman on the bed had been left by her husband—deserted, everybody said, except Huldah Sarvice. He took two boys on with him, and left the woman, who was too ill to travel in a wagon. She had been a welcome guest to Huldah, though her presence and her illness well-nigh broke up the business of the eating-house, and though there was little money to pay board with, even at first; and none at all when the husband failed to send back any word.

So far from dwelling upon this feature of the case, Huldah had only been indignant that she let the husband and father take the two boys away with him.

"A pore, do-less, shiftless creature," she used to mourn, shaking her head. "I doubt not he's got hisself and both them chil'en drownded or injured up some way. I wish't I'd a-held on to

the boys while I had a-holt of 'em. He wasn't fitten to raise 'em, anyhow."

Aunt Huldah's orphans usually reflected her own generous disposition. When the baby was born, and the children were brought in to view the tiny addition to their group, Gess and Tell, whose full names were Gessner and Tellfair Hudson, and who always echoed each other's sentiments, regarded it with dubious approval.

"Gee, ain't it red!" objected Gess.

"Reckon it's sunburnt," Tell added.

"Where'd it come from, 'Aunt Huldy?" asked little Romance, plaintively.

"The angels brung it," Huldah replied smilingly, rocking the little bundle gently in her big motherly lap.

"Oh, Aunt Huldy—for us? Did they bringed it for us?" asked excitable little 'Alabama. "We're going to keep it, ain't we? I can take care of it. I can rock it. You ner Sissy won't need to leave off your work none 'cause 'bout the baby—*my baby!*" And she danced up and down delightedly, bending forward to peep close into the little face.

"Ask the angels to take it back," Romance muttered. "We don't want it—they's enough of us here, now."

This was the one sensitive, difficult child of all



"Did they bringed it for us?" asked excitable little Alabama. PAGE 6



her brood—its one aristocrat. His father, Romance Ewing, was an elegant and high-bred man who had earned an unenviable reputation for unscrupulous methods and dare-devil bravery, during a brief residence in Emerald. One week after the death of his beautiful young wife, Ewing brought the boy to the Wagon-Tire House. There was little said; the father was a man distraught, as much at the thought of leaving his child, as at the recent loss of his wife.

"I trust him to you, Mrs. Sarvice," he told her. "I've had a run of hard luck recently; this"—presenting two ten-dollar bills and a five—"this is all I have on hand. It goes for one month, and I'll send more from my next stopping-place."

"Twenty-five dollars a month is more than I'll use fer him, Ewing," Huldah suggested.

"That's all right," the man answered, "give him everything he wants, and spend anything that's over on the other children."

"Why not take him along?"

"I can't take a child where I'm going. It wouldn't be safe for him."

"Nor fer you," Huldah interrupted gently. "Why not stay here with him fer a while? He needs you—an' you need him. Not that I ain't jest proud to keep him; but why not stay—fer a while?"

A spasm contracted Rome Ewing's handsome delicate-featured face.

"No. It's the chance of a lifetime, this—this thing I'm going into down in Mexico. I'll come out of it a rich man—or I'll not come out at all. If I don't, you'll—you'll—"

"I'll deal by the boy as if he was my own," Huldah supplied.

Remittances from Ewing had ceased after three months. Huldah might, more than once, have placed the child in a home; but dared not. She told those who asked about him that, if she raised him to be a good boy twelve years old, she'd give him up (it was her custom thus to crucify her heart, for the good of the children), but that for the present she would trust no one with him save herself.

* * * * * * * *

She straightened up from the bed and its quiet sleeper with a long sigh.

"Sissy, you go down to Galindro's and tell him to make that there coffin jest like he promised it to me. And then you go by the store and the post-office and tell 'em Miz' Lane is dead, and that your Aunt Huldy is goin' to try to have a sort of funeral. They won't be nobody much to come, and I reckon I'll have to manage the preacher's

part best I kin; but a funeral we are goin' to have fer the pore soul 'fore she's laid away."

Narcissa, humbly aware that honors to the dead came before her own feelings, put by the question of the future ownership of that dear baby, donned the slat sunbonnet once more and went forth.

Later in the afternoon the sound of voices raised in a hymn might have been heard in the little shack, a rusty wisp of something black was upon the door-knob—"The nighest thing to crape that I had about," Huldah had said—and later still a hack with the seats removed carried all that was left of the baby's mother to its last resting-place.

The service was hardly over when Mrs. Carter, for whom Aunt Huldah had sent, arrived. She was the wife of a rich ranchman, and she had asked for Narcissa oftener than anybody else, Huldah shrewdly suspected, because she found it well-nigh impossible in that country to keep servants. She hesitated a little at the door, then observing, "Oh, the funeral's over, is it? Well, I'm glad—I hate funerals," entered.

Huldah led her visitor from the porch, where most of the children were gathered listening to these rather unsuitable remarks, into the room



where the three-months-old baby, freshly washed and dressed, lay on Narcissa's lap.

"Is that the child? Billy said you hoped I'd take the child—he thought that was what you wanted to see me about."

She bent over and began examining the baby as one does some inanimate object that one is about to purchase. His infant majesty resented this by setting up a sturdy howl.

"Oh, my goodness! Is that the way it behaves?" cried Mrs. Carter, backing off. "I couldn't have it about if it's going to make a noise like that. Major Carter must have a quiet house. Is it—has it got any teeth?"—in exactly the tone the purchaser of a horse might use to inquire, "What are his gaits? Has he any vices?"

"He ain't an 'it,' ma'am," said Narcissa, solemnly. "He's a boy."

"A boy!" echoed Mrs. Carter. "And you don't know anything of the parents, except that they were movers, and that the man deserted the woman here!"

"No, ma'am, I p'intedly do not know that much," Huldah replied. "They wasn't movers, as the sayin' goes—not tramps, I mean. They was jest goin' from one place to another. An' I ain't never heard from that there feller that he deserted his wife. An' tell I do, I shall believe

that somethin's happened to him, or to them two boys o' his'n, which I ought to 'a' kep' instead o' lettin' him take."

"My goodness gracious, Mrs. Sarvice! How you can speak of taking more children into this little shanty, crowded as it is with everybody's young-ones, and you run to death to try to support them—"

Huldah Sarvice laid a swift hand upon the lady's sleeve.

"Please, ma'am, I'll have to trouble you not to speak thataway before my chil'en. The house ain't one bit too small fer 'em; an' I ain't run to death lookin' after 'em."

"Oh, well, if you'd let me take both"—a strange look flashed over her face, and she managed an uneasy little laugh—"these two seem to belong in a pair; and since you don't find the work here at all heavy, I should think you could spare Narcissa." There was a note of positive entreaty in Mrs. Carter's voice.

"For a servant? No'm, I don't keep an employment agency," Huldah replied.

"And I don't keep an orphan-asylum," Mrs. Carter answered in anger, gathering up her gloves and parasol. "I don't keep a refuge for heaven knows whose brats! Narcissa—"

"Please, ma'am, I'm 'dopted here," broke in

Sissy's plaintive voice. "I couldn't be sent away to nobody. Aunt Huldy says I'm 'dopted here."

Mrs. Carter was rustling toward the door, her trailing skirts gathered in one hand.

"Well, ma'am, that's jest as ye think best, of course," Huldah assented, following her out. "Ef I had the riches the good Lord has given to you, I don't know of anything on earth I'd as lief do with 'em as keep an orphans' home. It's what I do with sech riches as God thinks best fer me to have; but ef I had your portion, of course I could keep a bigger one."

Mrs. Carter turned back at the door. She looked long into the patient, seamed old face fronting her, where the cheeks, like winter apples, were so rosy below those fine gray eyes that had always the brightness of tears in them.

"I suppose you do a lot of good, Mrs. Sarvice," she said, "but you made me mad just now. I don't think it does any good to make people mad."

She was fumbling in her purse as she spoke. Now she brought out a coin and laid it in Huldah's ready hand.

"There! I'm sorry I spoke as I did; but I can't take the baby—without Narcissa. It might turn out bad. Goodness knows what blood it's got; and I do think that you might let me have

Narcissa." She looked keenly in Huldah's face. Seeing the "No" that was so evident there, she said sharply: "Well, good-by."

As she moved down the street, trim and dainty in her ruffled organdie, the lace-covered parasol above her flowery hat, Huldah looked after her, then opened her hand and gazed upon the coin in its palm. It was a quarter.

CHAPTER II

THE LADY FROM GEORGIA

"Nay, I'll put on a hodden grey
And seek until I find him;
And when I see that fause, fause knight
It's with a chain I'll bind him."

It was the next day after the poor little funeral that there rode up to the shack-door, where hung the burnished wagon-tire, a tall, fair-haired, fine-looking fellow who hailed cheerily, "Hello, Aunt Huldy!"

This was Troy Gilbert, sheriff of the county. 'Aunt Huldy's boy he had been, since, a lad of fourteen fresh from the East, he came out to Texas to be a cowboy. He had boarded with her when in off the range, and she mended his socks, washed his clothes and kept the dust brushed off the pure gold of his boyish character. Now, as Huldah came out, the big fellow greeted her heartily. Reaching down from the saddle, he first shook her hand, and then patted her head fondly.

"How are you, 'Aunt Huldy? How you

Narcissa." She looked keenly in Huldah's face. Seeing the "No" that was so evident there, she said sharply: "Well, good-by."

As she moved down the street, trim and dainty in her ruffled organdie, the lace-covered parasol above her flowery hat, Huldah looked after her, then opened her hand and gazed upon the coin in its palm. It was a quarter.

They were always lost. She spent much time searching for them while they rode jauntily upon the top of her gray head. When discovered there, and jerked reprovingly down, she would look at the beholder, one glass somewhat below her right eye and the other hopelessly above the left, and inquire with comic severity: "What kind o' person do you reckon them there spectacle-makers think I am? Do you reckon they think I've got one eye in my forrud and t'other in my left cheek-bone?"

This time Gilbert laughed and, with a little poke in the air toward his old friend's grizzled mop, and "They're on your head, as usual, Aunt Huldy," proceeded to read:

"CEDAR GROVE, GEORGIA.

"Mr. Troy Gilbert, Sheriff,

"Blowout, Wild Horse County, Texas.

"*Dear Sir*—

"I write you to inquire of a man by the name of Robert Irenus Patterson. He is my good-for-nothing, worthless husband. He was never any manner of account in the world to me, and he finally left me more than a year ago. I have been searching for him ever since. Recently I had information that he was somewhere in Wild Horse County, probably in Blowout. I under-

stand that you are a decent man and a good sheriff, and I suppose you will aid me in this matter.

"The man is about middling height, sort of light complected, with straggling hair and mustache, goes kind of limpy, though he ain't really lame, and he isn't no earthly manner of account. The only mark I know of that you can tell him by is that he has had a felon on the first finger of his left hand, and it left the finger sort of marked. It is twisted at the end so that it looks like something's bill—"

"'Like something's bill'!" reiterated Gilbert. "Did you ever in your life hear such a description as that? 'Like something's bill,'" he repeated and roared joyfully.

Continuing, he read: "I am leaving for Blowout on Tuesday's train. Shall probably arrive there the following Monday on the stage. I shall expect you to find some decent place for me to board, and to assist me in the search.

"Yours respect.,

"LUCERIA PATTERSON."

When Gilbert had finished reading the letter, he glanced from the written sheet down at Aunt Huldah. She stood gazing up in open-mouthed wonder, and now ejaculated, "Well, I'll be

whipped! What on earth a woman that can see through a man like that wants to chase after him fer—w'y, Gib, what *do* you reckon she wants of him?"

"Well, we don't know, Aunt Huldy; she may want to eat him up when she gits a-holt of him. She may want to jest wear him out. I reckon we ain't got no concern with that. The man's her husband, and I suppose she's got the right—the legal right—to git a-holt of him if she kin, and to settle with him her own way. You bet I don't marry none."

Huldah merely snorted. Huldah's snorts might mean a great deal.

Gilbert came to the practical question at issue.

"I thought I'd bring her here to you, Aunt Huldy, to board," he said. "You need a boarder now, don't you?"

"Law yes, honey! I need boarders bad enough —so bad 'at I reckon I've got to take this here fierce, husband-chasin' lady from Georgia."

"Well, I'll fetch her over this evening, if she comes on the stage," said Gilbert, "and if she don't, I'll be in myself, anyhow. So long!" And he rode away.

Huldah stood a moment gazing after him, the pleasant look on her face that this big fellow's presence always called there. Then she turned

and went back into the Wagon-Tire House shaking her head, smiling quizzically, and murmuring something to herself about the woman who pursued a husband she so despised.

That afternoon Gilbert came, walking beside the lady from Georgia, carrying a large valise and a small satchel. Aunt Huldah was out at the moment, so Gilbert seated his companion, and himself stood, sombrero in hand, waiting.

The lady from Georgia, having sat down, surveyed the small topsy-turvy room with disfavor. Sis, dish-cloth in hand, peeped in from the kitchen; Gess and Tell were popping up at the windows occasionally with a muffled whoop. Little Ally, in her usual position at the cradle's foot, was rocking the baby, while Romey fretfully entreated her to come away from the presence of the big intruder and play with him.

"Is this here the only ho-tel in town?" the Georgia woman inquired abruptly.

The sheriff grinned broadly.

"This ain't a hotel at all," he explained. "We boys most generally call it Aunt Huldy's Orphans' Home; but it's the only place in town just now. Kansas Charlie did run a—hm-m, you might say, a tavern, over at the 'dobe; but he got run out of town a week ago, and nobody's opened up his shack for business since. We're a-goin' to

get Aunt Huldy in over there; but at present this little orphans' home o' hers is the best place there is for a lady like you."

"Orphans' home!" echoed the lady from Georgia. "Did you think I was an orphan?"

Huldah came in at this point. Looking kindly upon the seeker after an errant husband, she found her to be exactly as she had imagined—a woman who had once been pretty in a delicate way, who was still pretty, indeed, had her small features not been drawn and stiffened into a vinegar-like sourness, suggesting a hardness and resentment against her kind that was adamantine. Her very presence was a whine.

"Well, ma'am," Huldah began in her cheery voice, "and how do you like Blowout? Reckon you'll be contented here fer a spell?"

The other was not quite ready with her accusations; but she began that catechism which makes the resident of a town feel that the new-comer lays the responsibility for any shortcomings with him, and vaguely implies that he has the town for sale, and that the speaker is a much desired and rather unwilling prospective purchaser thereof.

"How many churches you got?"

"Jest one, thank God!" Huldah replied fervently. It was not clear whether she thanked

her Creator that there was but one church, or that there was any church at all.

"Which kind—Methodist, Baptist, or what?" inquired the lady from Georgia, with a severe eye upon Huldah's unblushing countenance.

"I reckon it's 'what'," Huldah replied genially. "We managed to git up a little frame shack last year." (She did not mention that she herself raised most of the money, dragooned old Pod Beeler into donating the planks, and stood guard over the boys while they worked upon the structure.)

"We got up a small kind of a church buildin' last year, and we're mighty proud when anybody will come along an' give us the word o' God in it. We have some very happy times with our little old church—ef it is a 'what'; an' I used to hold the Sunday-school thar' reg'lar, till I had the baby to take keer of."

"Hm-m!" sniffed the lady from Georgia; "I couldn't think of attendin' any church but my own."

"Couldn't?" echoed Huldah. "Wal, to me Christianity's jest like 'east: you can't raise bread without 'east; you can't lift up folks without God's grace. But when you have got that, I ain't a bit particular which kind. Some doc-



trines is like hop 'east; they'll stand a heap o' knockin' round an' keerless handlin'. Some's like salt risin'—you got to coddle 'em powerful. Some's dry 'east that keeps a good many years, and some you've got to use, or the goodness'll all fizz out of it. But when you've raised the bread with any one of 'em—really raised it—and it ain't sour and it ain't soggy, w'y, where in goodness' name is the use o' fussin' 'bout which brand of 'east you used?"

"Well, I give up other churches when I j'ined my own. When a body j'ines the church they have got to give up a heap. I give up all manner of sinful pleasures—"

"And I suppose pretty much all pleasures *is* sinful?" interposed Huldah.

"Certainly they air," responded the lady from Georgia, looking at the other with suspicion. "I give up all manner of sinful pleasures, and I had a heap of 'em—dancing, fiddling, going to parties and balls, dressing gay and having admiration and sech. A Christian has got to give up—"

"I think you air a mighty pore arithmeticker," interposed Huldah, kindly. "My understandin' of God's word is that when you air seekin' the kingdom of the Lord, everything else you want, an' everything that's good fer you, is a-goin' to be added unto you. Here you've sot and told us

a string o' things as long as from here to the Chinaman's wash-house, to prove to me that them 'at seeks the kingdom o' the Lord is a-goin' to have everything they want, an' everything 'at's pleasant, substracted from 'em. Tell you, Miz' Patterson, you're a mighty pore arithmeticker. Dassent go to anybody's church, and ain't goin' to let none of 'em come to yours—"

"I give them all up when I j'ined my church," repeated the new-comer. "They are welcome to turn me from their doors. I don't expect them to want me. I certainly ain't goin' to pester them."

"Wal," returned Huldah, "I don't want it never laid up ag'in me that I made the religion of Christ so ugly I turned folks away from it. I don't believe you really want to, neither. You're jest tired and outdone and kinder in a bad humor all the time about—about other things. Come on, Miz' Patterson, and let me show you to your room. It's mighty pore, but it's the best there is to be had, I reckon, in Blowout."

When Huldah had taken the lady from Georgia to the little board room assigned her, she returned to find Gilbert standing on the porch fanning himself with his sombrero.

"Pill, ain't she?" the big fellow murmured, giving the sombrero a twitch toward the interior.

"Wal, she's somethin' of a dose," responded

Huldah, smiling also; "but I reckon she's sont to me for some good purpose besides jest her board money. It's be'n some time sence I had anything of her kind to wrastle with. I 'spect I need that sort o' medicine. Gilbert," she said, turning suddenly to the man beside her, "who is it 't's bought old Kansas Charlie's saloon 'crost from the 'dobe?"

"The Roundup? Me," responded Gilbert with a quick, cheery manner that covered real uneasiness.

"You're jokin', Gilbert. You're a-jokin' me!" Huldah cried sharply, looking in the man's face.

"No, I ain't joking. I bought the Roundup; and I'm a-goin' to run it—"

"Run it? Run a saloon—you—a sheriff—the sheriff of the county!"

Gilbert turned to her almost angrily.

"Now, you're joking, Aunt Huldah. Why sha'n't I run a saloon because I'm sheriff? The sheriff's the very man to run saloons—ought to have every one of 'em run by a sheriff; then they'd be run clean and orderly. I'm going to have a clean place of it—none of the rowdy doings and shoot-ups and sech, that Kansas Charlie had. It's going to be a good, clean place, I tell you."

"You might as well talk of good, clean smallpox!" declared Huldah, contemptuously.

"Suppose you are going to quarrel with me about it?" questioned Gilbert, straightening up from the wall against which he had been leaning.

"No, I'm not goin' to quarrel with you ary word. I'm jest a-goin' to give you right up, Gib, tell you give that up. I wouldn't, ef 'twas the smallpox, because you couldn't help that. But you went and got this thing yourself—done it a-purpose; and I'm a-goin' to give you up tell you give it up—tell you git enough of it."

"Well, you won't be the first person that's gone back on a man 'cause he ain't up enough in the world to suit them—turned their backs on him 'cause his work—"

"Gib, you've got too much sense to talk thataway. You don't believe nary word o' that stuff. You're jest a-talkin'."

"All right—all right, ma'am. I ain't a-goin' to run after you, ner beg you, ner nothin'. I hain't never done nothin' ag'inst you. If you should want me—you'll know where to find me always. But I s'pose you ain't a-goin' to want anything of me? I reckon you wouldn't take my money, even to feed your orphans?"

"Yes, I would, Gib. I'd take the money of Satan hisself to feed my chil'en. One dollar is the same as another dollar; and the good Lord

knows I need 'em for these pore little ones o' Hisn."

"I've been racing round over town to get the 'dobe for you, all furnished like Kansas Charlie left it. I thought you ought to be able to make a good living there. I expected to board with you, of course; but now, if I get it for you, I'll move my things out—and fumigate the place before you go in."

"That's mighty good and kind—like you always are, Gib," Huldah said. But it did not fully appear whether his kindness was in getting the better home for her and her charges, or in leaving and fumigating it; and she did not remonstrate with him for going.

"Well, I don't have to be told more than once that a person don't want anything of me. I'll go my own way and 'tend to my own business 'cordin' to my own ideas." And, with a hard look that sat ill on his frank, fresh-colored face, Troy Gilbert put his hat on, stepped from the little porch, and moved off down the street.

CHAPTER III

THE DAY'S WORK

"Who drives the horses of the sun
Shall lord it but a day;
Better the lowly deed well done,
Well kept, the humble way."

"What in the world's all this 'hurrah boys' about?" cried Aunt Huldah. She stood in the kitchen doorway. Out of a cloud of dust came the sound of galloping hoofs, with childish voices, shrieking, "Whoa! whoa!" "Hi! Gug-gug-good bossy!" "Sook cow—sook cow—sook cow! Soo, soo, soo-oo!" And from this blur there presently emerged old Brindle, followed by Gess and Tell. The cow was nearly standing on her head at every jump; and one horn dangled so as to threaten her eye.

Gess and Tell had been sent with old Brindle, as was the custom, far out beyond the flats, to where the grass was good. They had been permitted to take Romey and Alabama, on the condition that they would keep them amused and contented.



"What in the name of creation have you boys done to that there cow?" inquired Aunt Huldah, severely.

"Why, you told us to 'muse the children," Tell began.

"An' the children, they wouldn't be 'mused 't all 'thout we'd play ropin'," Gess finished out for him.

Huldah noticed how the shred of rope dangled from the injured horn.

The twins had evidently arranged a roping match to entertain Romey and Alabama—with this result.

"I don't know as I ever seed anything that come as near makin' me mad," she remarked as she came forward. "You boys look out now, this here cow is just servigorous. She's liable to poke some o' you in the eye with that there hurt horn. Mighty! I got to git that horn off'n her some way, 'r else she'll put her own eyes out with it."

The lady from Georgia had now added herself to the spectators. Sissy stood, dish-cloth in hand as ever, at the window; Roach Porterman, the blacksmith from the corner, came running up.

"Better let me rope her right, Aunt Huldy," he advised. Almost any man in west Texas can throw a rope so as to catch over a cow's horns.

"I dassent do it, Roach. You see the pore beast

ain't got but one horn—in working order, that is —an you 're liable to jest pull that out with your rope. O-o-oh! pore thing!" as the cow bellowed and pawed and shook her head, so that the injured horn dangled, menacing her eye more than ever.

"Don't see what you can do, 'thout you let me shoot her, Aunt Huldy," suggested Kid Barringer, who came up from the direction of the street, lovingly fingering his "gun".

"Shoot her!" echoed Huldah. "Now if that ain't adzackly like a man. Don't study 'bout nothin' but shootin' somethin' er 'nother! You boys go 'long—er stay and see the performance, jest as you choose. I'm a-goin' to take that there horn off that there cow, and clap a tar plaster on the spot to stop the bleedin'."

"I don't see how you can do it, Aunt Huldy, an' her not roped and tied. She will kill you. She's just that mad," Roach remonstrated. There was a circle of onlookers now, though at a respectful distance, for the suffering animal kept muttering and starting.

Huldah wasted no more words, but retired to the house, from which she emerged in a few minutes armed with a bucket of slop and the tar plaster. She called seductively to the cow, and got close enough to put a hand upon her, but the slightest motion toward the animal's head



brought on demonstrations which were exceedingly terrifying.

"You'll get yourself killed—you'll get your fool self killed, Aunt Huldy!" roared Roach in the stress of his feelings; "and the town can't spare you."

"Hep! Yup! Hi!" burst in Kid Barringer. "Let me shoot the old thing, an' be done with it."

But Huldah was a strategist.

"Now, all I ast o' you boys is to keep out o' this here cow-business," she declared; then she went inside the shanty, shut the door and pushed up the kitchen window. Leaning out, she set down the bucket of slop with many a seductive "soo cow" and "good bossy."

Brindle came nosing forward. She was getting over her terror a bit, and she was desperately hungry. The twins had allowed no stops for refreshments in their roping contest. The big, blunt nose went down into the pail. Aunt Huldah leaned over, grasped the horn and gave it a little wrench. It was hanging by so slight a thread of skin that, when it came off, Brindle scarcely more than tossed up her head and snorted at the pain. Aunt Huldah handed the amputated member back to Sissy behind her in the window.

"Gimme the tar plaster now, quick, while the slop holds out!" she called. Provided with this,

she poised it for a moment above the spot she wished to cover, then soused it down and pressed it on. There was an explosion, a scattering of swill, bucket-staves, hoofs, a long dismal bellow, a giggling and running among the spectators, and old Brindle was discovered standing amid the scattered wreck of the pail, with the tar plaster firmly fixed where the horn had been.

Huldah leaned on the window sill and contemplated her handiwork.

"I got it ruther fer down," she deprecated; "but then I couldn't jest choose my spot an' have it as I'd of wished. It's there, an' it's there to stay."

"Oh, yes, it's there to stay," echoed Kid Barringer, "and I'm goin' to apply for the post of veterinarian on our ranch fer ye, Aunt Huldy."

"I bet I could do better than the fellow you've got," Huldah called after him as the man strolled away, laughing.

Such were Huldah's daily duties! To care for an infant less than four months old; to keep house, with such assistance as Narcissa could give her; to prepare three meals daily and send one of the children to pound on the tire and summon such customers as cared to come; to doctor a sick animal when necessary, or a "sick human", as her word was, if one applied; to scatter as much



sunshine as she could; to attend to the children's morals first, and, if time were, to their manners as well; to look after their souls, and not, if it could be helped, neglect their bodies: these, with a thousand unexpected responsibilities that arose and thrust themselves upon her because she was one who invited responsibility, made up her days. If the house was "cluttered," the housekeeping what she herself called "through-other," if the children learned to be expert in fastening buttonless garments on themselves, and even the youngest of them came to give his meed of help, who can wonder?

From the first, little Alabama assumed the responsibility of the baby. It was her baby, and Romey pined, bereft of his mate. Ally was a round-faced, sanguine-tempered little creature, with the restlessness of quicksilver, and a great intelligence in her big, inquiring, gray eyes. She had early learned not to make trouble. When the little dress bands, being buttonless, had been pinned and pinned and pinned, till there were two holes, one in each end, Ally was discovered pulling one hole through the other and fastening it in place by slipping in a little mesquite twig whittled smooth.

"Pore baby!" said Aunt Huldah. "And yit, I don't know; seems like chil'en that's taught to

do fer theirselves and others gits along better—in their souls, anyhow—than them as has too much done fer 'em." All this, while she was mending the little frock, with tremulous, toil-hardened hands.

Romey made reprisals upon the baby. It had entered his domain and taken away his willing slave. He discovered that he was fond of the contents of the baby's bottle, and he stole it whenever he could. The cave of this young brigand was under the parlor table where the cover concealed him from view. But the baby's faithful and adoring caretaker, little Alabama, finally ferreted him out; and after that the cry would go up, "Oh, Aunt Huldy! Aunt Huldy! Romey's stole the baby's bottle again! Please, ma'am, come and take it away from him, and make him say he won't steal it any more."

On these occasions, Aunt Huldah was urged to use corporal punishment. But she always replied to Sissy or Mrs. Patterson: "I ain't a-goin' to strike Romey fer the baby's sake. Ef I do that, like as not he won't love the baby. He'll come of it—you'll see he'll come of it when he gits older. You don't suppose he's goin' to be stealin' a baby's bottle when he's a growed-up man, do you?"

"No," in answer to a look from the Georgia



woman; "no, I'll not whip him to please you, Miz' Patterson, ner Sissy, ner nobody. I remember when I went home with my first child, Sammy. My mother, she was a master hand fer seein' chil-'en made to behave. She said Sammy spoke sassy to her—he wasn't quite three years old—and she come to tell me that I had to whip him. Well, I couldn't go ag'in my mother, an' I couldn't whip my child."

Aunt Huldah began to chuckle.

"I jest took that boy out in the back yard where they was a little hitchin' post 'bout as tall as he was. I got me a good switch, an' I stood Sammy up ag'in that there post, an' I give the post the best switchin' it ever had—maw overseein' of the job from the porch, an' wonderin' why Sammy didn't holler. By and by Sammy looks up an' says, jest as innocent, 'Mammy, what you whippin' the post fer?' That called maw's attention to how I was gettin' round her, an' then I was mad enough to 've give the boy a little scutchin' sure enough. But I never—I jest braced up an' had it out fair and honest with maw, instead."

This same Romey was a puzzle, even to Aunt Huldah's patience and boundless love. Before the baby came, he had been the youngest among

the orphans; and she never ceased to call him her baby-child.

One night she found him weeping, desolately but silently, in his small bed.

"What's the matter, baby? Daddy will be comin' home one o' these days to his boy. W'y, what on earth is the matter with my baby-child?"

"Oh, Aunt Huldy, Aunt Huldy!" the boy sobbed, with little wet lips against Huldah's brown neck. "'Tisn't 'bout farver—not all 'bout him this time. Sissy, she's been tellin' me 'bout heaven. Sissy she says we's all a-goin' to have wings when we gits to heaven, and I don't *want* wings, Aunt Huldy! I'd be scared to fly. Heaven is a awful way-up-high place, anyhow; an' it allus scares me to think of bein' so high-up—'nen to have wings, w'y, it's just turrible."

Huldah took the small sufferer and rocked him in her motherly arms.

"Lawzy me, baby! You're jest like other folks. Ef you hain't got any trouble handy, w'y, you make one. Don't you never worry about heaven—the worry is, to git thar'. I want my baby to know, right now, that heaven is jest what each and every person wishes for most."

Romey sat up in Aunt Huldah's lap.

"A pony, 'stead o' wings?" he asked with interest.



Huldah felt a small twinge over the unorthodox statement, yet she maintained stoutly:

"Course, ef it's a pony you want when you git thar'. But, ef you was to find after you got thar' that wings was all the fashion, and that you liked 'em best, w'y, they'd not be denied you."

The gray eyes were wet above the baby's tousled head.

"That's all of heaven, baby-child; no good thing shall be denied you thar'. You can have it all—all—and it won't make you mean an' uppity to have so much—not in heaven, it won't."

CHAPTER IV

THE OLD WAGON-TIRE HOUSE

"For vast estates, and castle-halls, . . .
Give me to hear the bare footfalls
Of children o'er
An oaken floor,
New-rinsed with sunshine, or bespread
With but the tiny coverlet
And pillows for the baby's head."

Mrs. Patterson emerged from her room one day and found Huldah sitting with a dead mouse in her lap, and tears in her eyes. The old woman raised her rosy, good-humored face and wiped those tears on the back of her hand.

"What's the matter?" asked the lady from Georgia.

"I pizened it," Aunt Huldah replied simply. "I was jest mean and ornery enough to put out pizen for the little feller."

"Laws, Aunt Huldy!" the Georgia woman drawled; "you air quare. You ain't goin' to hold that hit's wrong to pizen mice, air you?"

"I ort to be hung. Jest like any other pizener," Huldah made indirect reply. "I been too



through-other in my housekeepin'. Mice is sent to make folks clean up and keep their food put away in boxes er in jars. Ef you don't leave lures around to toll the little fellers in, they'd let you alone. I'm jest as good and honest, I reckon, as a man that's kep' a saloon, and then pizened the whisky. My heart misgive me when I put out that there pizen—had to be so keerful for fear some of the chil'en would get at it—I ort to 'a' knowed then that it was a mean wicked thing not to keer ef this pore little feller's chil'en got at it. Look how pretty he's made, Miz' Patterson. The good God that made him shorely never meant an old fat woman to come along and pizen him."

"Pretty! A mouse—an' hit dead!"

Aunt Huldah rose heavily, and laid the little body gently on the window sill.

"Well, I'll get about my work—but I don't pizen no more mice. Reckon I'll let the chil'en have him and have a fun'al over him. They'll enjoy that greatly, and it'll l'arn 'em some Christian ways."

Huldah was not above learning from others. The lady from Georgia, disaffected, eaten to the core with selfishness, was a lesson to the elder woman in the matter of exactness and neatness.

Little Ally's Sunday frock was a shepherd's plaid, made from an ancient and time-worn "sum-

mer shawl" of Aunt Huldah's. It became necessary, in the exigencies of the case, to piece the front breadth of the skirt across, and Huldah had not matched the plaids.

"Laws, Miz' Sarvice, hit does pester me to see that poor child—and she'd be a pretty child if somebody'd curl her hair—goin' around with her stummick out of joint, as one may say. Would you mind if I was to pick it out and match them there plaids?" And the Georgia woman's skilful fingers made little Alabama's frock seemly.

Even Sissy needed—and learned—her lesson now and then. Meekly patient, pathetically broken to the idea that life was a compromise, and meant giving up a great deal which you really wanted, Sissy's soul within her yet rebelled at the continual cooking and eating of dried apples. And Huldah was astonished one morning to find her entire supply gone.

"What on airth, Sissy, do you reckon has come of them there dried apples? Roach's burro couldn't get at 'em, could she? She'd of et 'em in a minute if she could. But you had 'em on the high shelf, didn't you?" she inquired blankly.

Sissy pulled her sunbonnet about her face, and answered with a murmur of sounds which might have meant almost anything.

"I was jest fixin' my mouth for dried-apple



pies; and now they hain't got any more at the store, and won't have till the new crop comes in, they say," Huldah pursued.

Who knew that better than Sissy—guilty Sissy, who had been down to make inquiries there before she perpetrated the deed?

A week after, came one of the infrequent rains which delight the plains-country; and when it cleared away, Gess and Tell burst into the house, shouting for Aunt Huldah.

"They's been a person murdered, Aunt Huldy, and they've buried 'em right in front of our door!" Gess shouted.

"And they're not a very big person, 'cause the grave's not very long—but it's a-risin'," Tell supplemented.

Aunt Huldah and Mrs. Patterson, followed by Ally and Romey, came out, to see Narcissa standing near a small mound weeping—she might have been taken for chief mourner.

"I f-f-feel just like a m-m-murderer!" she gasped. "I wish't you'd whip me, Aunt Huldy—only, don't never, never ask me to eat no more of 'em."

The grave-like mound was, indeed, as Tell had said, rising. Now, as they gazed, it burst open at the top, and out poured a volcano of dried apples.

"What on airth—" began Huldah.

"I buried 'em!" sobbed Narcissa. "I jest hated 'em! I jest hated to cook 'em; an' I buried 'em; and the old rain come an' swelled 'em; and they riz—jest like a gug-gug-ghost! And now I wish't you'd whip me, 'cause I can't feel a bit sorry."

Mrs. Patterson's eyes snapped.

"Well, whipped you'd be, if you was a child of mine!" and she looked inquiringly at Huldah.

Huldah was holding her sides and laughing.

"Oh, law, Narcissy, honey! Why can't you never learn to speak out? Ef you hated dried apples all that bad, why did you bottle the hate up in ye till it bu'st out thisaway?" And despite remonstrances Narcissa went, as Mrs. Patterson would have said, unpunished. Huldah well knew that the girl's own remorse was her best punishment.

With so many children, and so little time to give exclusively to them, of course a thousand and one questions came to Aunt Huldah for settlement or arbitration during the running skirmish of each day. She leaned ever to the offender's side, believed always in letting sin punish itself, if possible.

The baby's energetic little nurse was never weary of her small charge. For hours she sat



in the end of the rude wooden cradle that Kid Barringer, who had been a carpenter before he was a cowboy, made for the little fellow, rocking him, crooning to him her own versions of Aunt Huldah's hymns.

"There is a happy land,
Far, far away;
Where saints in glory stand,"—

was transmuted into—

"There is a happy-lan',
Fur, fur away;
Where Glosrystan lives."

The sentimental wail of Aunt Huldah's old-time song, *It Matters Little Now, Lorena,* figured as *Mother's Little Nowlerie;* and a very old ballad which began, *Upon the Hill He Turned,* was always alluded to as *Churny Chill.* But this curious gibberish plainly passed current in baby language, for the little one gurgled and laughed and answered with songs of his own.

One day the lively motor in the end of the cradle rocked it completely over, so that it stood with both rockers in the air. Aunt Huldah's first notice of this state of affairs was the eruption of a small person into the yard where, with Sissy's help, she was hanging out the clothes.

"Aunt Huldy, Aunt Huldy!" cried this small person, with a very red face and big frightened eyes. "Aunt Huldy, I didn't tip the baby's cradle over! I didn't rock it over! It doesn't be fallened over!"

As Huldah afterward said to Mrs. Patterson: "I ran in the house with my heart right smack in my mouth; and you could have knocked me down with a feather when I saw that there cradle bottom-side up, and nary a sound comin' frum it."

As Huldah and Sissy stood terrified, afraid to raise the cradle, dreading what they might see, a downy poll was poked out from beneath it, where the foot and head boards held it some ten inches from the floor, and the baby crept forth and looked about him, none the worse for his sudden whirl.

Aunt Huldah gathered up her treasure in her arms, and Narcissa began to urge the enormity of her crime upon the small offender.

"'Twas a wicked story you told, Alabama. You might have killed the baby—and then you storied about it."

Alabama was already dissolved in tears, and Aunt Huldah's heartsome, loving voice broke in.

"She didn't mean to tell a lie-story, Sissy. Nobody would have felt worse about hurtin' the baby than Ally. She jest meant that she wasn't



never goin' to rock so fur ag'in, and that she didn't mean to tip the baby over. Come here, honey. Ain't that so?"

Thus did Huldah teach: always by imputing good rather than evil, always by expecting the best.

Once she was asked in the little Sunday-school, "How is it, Aunt Huldy, that you can always find some good to say about people? And you always say it. Don't you think it is right to mention people's faults at all?"

Her answer was: "Yes, *sir*, I believe in mentionin' people's faults—sometimes. But I believe in mentionin' each one's faults right spang out to ***him***. As for seein' good in everything, there's always somethin' you can say for folks. There's a story, I think it's in the Jew Bible 'at we don't use—"

"The Apocrypha," supplied Miss Genevieve.

"It might be in somethin' of that sort," returned Huldah, doubtfully. "Well, this here story tells that there was a pore dead dog, lyin' in the streets of Jerusalem. Every man, woman and child 'at came by had somethin' hard to say of that dead dog. One'd say 'at he wasn't nothin' but a stray cur anyhow, and 'twas better he was dead. 'Nother'd say 'at the folks ort to be

ashamed to let such a turrible lookin' old dog lay there in the street. 'Nother'd tell how ga'nted he was—looked like he'd starved to death. And many of 'em give him a kick as they passed. At last came the Lord Jesus Christ walkin', as He did in them days, 'mongst mankind as a man. When He came to the pore little dog, He bent down and looked at him, and He says, 'He's got teeth like pearls.' And you know that's true; even a dead dog has got white teeth, and we'd do well to mention them—an' let the rest pass."

Gess and Tell had one cherished possession—in partnership, as were all their possessions. It was a *papier-mâché* sheep and lamb, of doubtful anatomy and impossible coloring. Upon this toy Romey set his covetous eye, and as he was destructive and it frail, the twins appealed to Aunt Huldah to interfere.

"Well, then, you two are great big boys, 'most men, ain't you? And you can afford to be careful not to hurt Romey's feelin's,—so don't you mention that there sheep and lamb before him, ner have it out to play with where he can see you."

This appealed to the taste for secrecy in child-nature, the delight in mild intrigue; and the twins returned a little later to say, "Oh, Aunt Huldy! we've got up a name for the sheep and lamb,



so's't we can talk about it before Romey, and he won't know what we mean. We're a-goin' to call it the *shaa* and *laa,* when he's around."

But alas, the brilliance of Romey's intellect, or the lack of invention on the part of the twins! The third day heard Gess pompously inquire of Tell, "Shall we take our *shaa* and *laa* with us when we go out with old Brindle this morning?"

And Romey interposed eagerly, "I know what the *shaa* and *laa* is—it's the sheep and lamb. And I want it—I want it to play with, too—I want it right now!"

When work was too pressing to give all six regular baths, Aunt Huldah was wont to let Sissy put old frocks upon the children, and superintend their immersion in a rain-barrel, which stood at the corner of the house. But every Saturday night saw a washing, a tubbing and a scrubbing that was regarded almost as a religious ceremonial at the Wagon-Tire House.

Then Gess and Tell were penned in the kitchen, a parole having been secured first that they would wash and not "cut up." From behind the closed doors came sounds of much scuffling, splashing and skylarking, with occasional appeals to authority of. "Tell won't wash my back, Aunt Huldy! You make him." Or, "Gess has gone

and bathed up all the warm water, Aunt Huldy; an' he's tryin' to make me wash in cold water."

Meantime, in the outer room, Sissy was scrubbing little Alabama, and Aunt Huldah giving Romey what she called "a extry-partic'lar goin' over." When all were thoroughly scrubbed and in clean night-gowns, when each small outer temple was made seemly, Aunt Huldah had a special, Saturday night version of their usual little family prayer meeting.

First came a court of inquiry to which all questions of manners or morals might be brought.

"Chil'en," she said, her little flock gathered about her, "I can't l'arn you no great amount of manners by rule; but I know they's one big rule to cover all questions of manners: ef you love your feller creatures—really *love* 'em—you ain't never goin' to greatly offend ag'in 'em in the way of manners."

Then Sissy, soured by the sight of some enemy's prosperity, might say:

"Aunt Huldy, I don't think bad people get punished in this world. I think they 'most always get what they be bad for."

"Lawzy, lawzy, child! don't you get any sech notions as that in your head. The punishment of sin is the sin itself. You be bad a right long



while, and you can't be good. Looks like your works is out of order and you're condemned to suffer. I've lived longer than you, honey, and I've l'arnt that the gains of the wicked are not to be coveted."

Mrs. Patterson was an unexpectedly interested attendant at these family prayer meetings. She was inclined to agree with Sissy, and believe that many of her acquaintances throve on evil doing.

"Laws, Miz' Patterson! sin's jest exactly like disease. I have saw persons that had got into wrong ways of thinkin' and wrong ways of doin' and seemed to thrive on it, like a consumpted person will git red cheeks and bright eyes fer a spell."

It was to this court that Narcissa brought her Sunday-school card.

"Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth." Those were the words, painted in fair colors upon the dog-eared bit of cardboard. Sunday-school had begun again in the little shack which Aunt Huldah had called a "what." The Allen girls from the Circle 7 ranch were taking a great interest in the work, and Aunt Huldah, whom care of the baby, in addition to all her other duties, kept very busy, was glad of their assistance. Sissy brought the card to her, and laid it in her lap.



"Miss Genevieve, she made 'em, and Miss Belle —she's the one that teaches me—she gave us all one," explained Sissy. "It's a teck. But Aunt Huldy, it pesters me. I can't see how that's right. Miss Belle, she explained it, and said that if God loved you very much, He sent you a lot of trouble, to make you be awful good."

Huldah pulled down the crippled spectacles, and read the card at arm's length, muttering and talking to her glasses as though they had been a rebellious cow or pony.

"Hold still there! How am I goin' to see to read through ye, ef ye can't stand a minute? Mm, mm, mm—oh yes, I see, Sissy; it's a verse out of the Bible. So Miss Belle said that, did she?"

"Yes'm. And it seemed to me that it was exac'ly like as ef you'd pick one of us children you liked the best—ef you ever would like one of us the best, and you say you don't—and jest spank that one all the time."

Huldah patted the thin little shoulder reassuringly, and looked into the anxious freckled face with a comfortable chuckle.

"Bless your heart, Sissy! Your idees is as crooked as my glasses!" shoving the offending spectacles up on her head. "It's thisaway, honey: all our life here on this earth is a school. The



good Lord, He made the school, an' the rules of the school. The little troubles is the a-b-ab's, the easy lessons. Some of us the Lord thinks worthy of good hard lessons, 'way over in the back o' the book. We call 'em big troubles; but that's what they are, good hard lessons, 'way over in the back o' the book. I shouldn't say that God loved one person more than another; but I should say that we ort to be proud when we air felt worthy to have one o' these good hard lessons; and we ort to take it as a mark o' God's love, and l'arn by it."

Huldah always refused to hear of such a thing as jealousy among her brood. Probably she was not familiar with the saying that comparisons are odious; but she practically applied it.

"No—no—no, baby, I don't love one o' you little tads no better than ary other one," she would protest. "I love Sis best for a big gal to he'p me good round the house; and I love Ally best for a little gal to tend to the baby; and I love Romey best for Aunt Huldy's brave boy, 'at's goin' to take care of Aunt Huldy when he gits bigger; an'—"

"An' what do you love us for, Aunt Huldy?" broke in Gess, eagerly and a little anxiously. It was always "us" with either Gess or Tell.

Huldah looked humorously at the pair.



"Well, sir, I reckon I love ye fer two of the liveliest boys in the state of Texas," she replied, laughing. And then, that none might lack his meed of praise, "I love ye partly 'cause ye allus say 'us,' an' love each other so."

Then came the prayers. Aunt Huldah encouraged originality in this matter, and would have been glad for each member of the little band to address his Maker as he was moved to do. But if this plan had been followed, Romey would never have prayed at all, except to petition Heaven briefly, passionately, almost peremptorily, for the instant return of his father; and Alabama, who was loquacious and a perfect fountain of love, would have exceeded any reasonable limit.

Beyond his own petition, "Send my farver safe home to-morrow," which was as iterant and wearing as the chirp of a young bird, the little boy used to go, sometimes rather grudgingly, through the bare form that Aunt Huldah had made for him; while enthusiastic little Ally, on her knees, would pray for one friend after another by name, and finally break out, opening one gray eye a peep to interrogate: "Aunt Huldy, Aunt Huldy, kin I pray for the burro?—kin I pray for the burro right here, between you and Miz' Patterson?"

The burro being assigned to these close quar-



ters in her petition, all of her animal friends came in for mention, till Gess and Tell who were awaiting their turn grew sulky, and Gess said,—and was reproved for it:

"Ef she's a-goin' to pray for every jack-rabbit an' prairie dog in Wild Hoss County, I'd ruther go to bed, an' say my prayers in the mornin'."

"Aunt Huldy," piped Tell's distressed tones, "I been sayin' my prayers in a whisper, with my head tucked right down here p'intin' to the ground. Will that make me be prayin' to the devil—will he git my prayer?"

The small sufferer comforted and reassured, and order restored, Aunt Huldah would lead the singing of some old-fashioned hymn. She had a tuneful voice, which would have been called a contralto, where such matters are noted; and when it was found that the lady from Georgia could sing "tribble," their little prayer meetings were made even more enjoyable.

"I'm gettin' right reconciled to this place," said the latter, at the conclusion of one of these evenings. "A body must have some friends near, and that you've been to me, Miz' Sarvice. I think a sympathizin' friend, somebody to weep with you in affliction, is a great comfort."

"Hm-m!" debated Huldah, doubtfully. "I'm very likely to do my cryin' up in short order,



an' I never need no he'p on it; but I do prize somebody to laugh with. Seems like laughin' all by your lone is selfish; and a good stiddy, hearty laugher is my delight."



Motioning to Sissy to lead on with the lantern, she scooped up Lon's clothes upon a dexterous arm, and was at the door before the man could utter a word -PAGE 57.



CHAPTER V

THE NEW WAGON-TIRE HOUSE

"The tanned face, garlanded with mirth,
It hath the kingliest smile on earth . . .
The sweat brow, diamonded with sweat,
Hath never need of coronet."

The new Wagon-Tire House, as everybody called it, was the most comfortable habitation Huldah Service had ever had for herself and her shifting, changing brood of orphans. Like many of the buildings in Blowout, it was adobe, with earthen floors and roof. A long single line of rooms in the shape of an L, it adorned the most prominent corner in Blowout, because it was the corner opposite Troy Gilbert's Roundup saloon. Kansas Charlie had taken much pride in his hotel (it was called the Cattle Exchange, under his administration); there were Brussels carpets on many of the floors, and lace curtains at the small parlor windows. Before its door now swung the wagon-tire, scoured to a hoop of silver, and with the great spike hung beside it ready to beat the summons to dinner.

Huldah was not lacking in business acumen,

and she could push her just claims, for the good of those dependent upon her. There were no connecting doors to the rooms of the Wagon-Tire House; one must go out on the street to get from one room to another; there were no locks on most of the doors, and casual cowboys used to stroll in late at night, and go to bed without disturbing any one to make known their presence or ask permission, just as they had under Kansas Charlie's administration.

It had been a regular part of his hotel business to make the rounds, with a lantern, about twelve or one o'clock each night, wake up the incidental or unchartered, and demand a proper tribute. This work was now solemnly undertaken by Huldah, sometimes with Sissy bearing the lantern; and woe be to the stranger within her gates who, having a pocket well lined with money, but perceiving he had only an old woman to deal with, sought to lessen the income of her Orphans' Home!

Lon Prendergast, of the X Q K, began in that way. Afterward he became one of the most enthusiastic of Aunt Huldah's admirers and friends; but that first night, when she found him in one of her beds, where he had ensconced himself without announcing the fact to any one, he smilingly refused to pay.

"No, ma'am; not a cent. You ort not for to leave your doors unlocked, thataway, onless'n you expect folks to walk right in and make theirselves to home."

Huldah set down her lantern and surveyed him smilingly, wondering whether he was sober enough to be worth talking to, or whether she should leave him till morning.

"Oh, you're to home, air you?" she inquired finally.

"I am that," declared Lon, hunching the blankets up over his shoulders.

"Well, sir," Huldah pursued genially, "every man ort to be willin' to keep up his home. This time you've chosen an orphants' home, as any of the boys'll tell ye. Ef you'd of paid your dollar fer your night's lodgin', I would have said no more; but as you brag so much on the 'commodations, I guess I'll have to assess you a little fer my chil'en's shoes. It's comin' cold weather, and I didn't really know where I was goin' to git six pair of shoes; but I reckon you're one o' the first to chip in an' he'p me."

Lon roused himself, and looked with interest at this unprecedented sort of old woman. He remembered now some vague shreds of talk he had heard about Aunt Huldah Sarvice of the Wagon-Tire House, and her orphans.



Motioning to Sissy to lead on with the lantern, she scooped up Lon's clothes upon a dexterous arm, and was at the door before the man could utter a word.—PAGE 57.





"Want me to he'p dress the chil'en, do you? Hain't you never heerd the text, 'Consider the lilies how they bloom; they toil not neither do they spin; and yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of 'em'?"

"*Yes, sir;* I know that there teck—but my thinkin' about it ain't dressed the chil'en one bit. They's two parts to that teck: it says, 'Consider the lilies, how they grow'; and then it goes on to mention that they was better dressed than Solomon. My chil'en *grow* all right; but I reckon you boys'll jest have to purvide the dressin' fer a while, as long as the Lord's so liberal with the growin'." And motioning to Sissy (who was as quick and clever as the best of them at things she comprehended) to lead on with the lantern, she scooped up Lon's clothes upon a dexterous arm, and was at the door before the man could utter a word.

"Reckon the money's here," she observed. "Reckon you'll stay till you git 'em; an' ef ye do, ye'll stay tell I git my pay an' "—with a twinkling smile—"my contribution."

Lon was simply struck dumb. He gazed with protruding eyes and fallen jaw, as this genial autocrat walked away with his trousers. And next morning when he sent an ambassador to



treat with her, the terms he offered were nothing short of handsome.

After that, as has been said, Lon Prendergast was one of her stanchest supporters.

Now, Huldah was placed exactly as she loved to be. Her house was full, she knew every soul in Blowout, just what was happening to them and what they were thinking, each day.

Poor Lone Deatherage, whose last friend it was her portion to be, tried hard to get her to come out and keep house for him on his ranch, promising that she might bring her orphans with her.

"No," she said; "I couldn't give up the House and go to live on a ranch; I don't care if t'would pay better in money, and you'd promise to let me keep the chil'en with me. I got to be with my fellow creeters. I don't feel like I'm more'n half-alive when I'm off all to myse'f, thataway. Hit's jest like a drop of water gettin' off to itse'f and swearin' it's a river. You know how quick the sun would dry it up. I'll stay in the stream, as long as the Lord leaves me here."

Mrs. Patterson went with her comfortable friend, and had the best room in the new Wagon-Tire House, it being arranged that she should teach the school. The housekeeping was still what Huldah called "through-other"; yet there

was a cheerful air of plenty, and the little band of children blossomed and flourished in the prosperous atmosphere.

"I never was cut out fer a housekeeper," Huldah was wont to say. "While I'm a chasin' one thing, 'nother gits away frum me. But they's no use talkin' about it; ef a thing is hard to do it won't be made one speck easier by argufyin' over it. You may work 'rithmetic sums thataway, but you can't work the sums in your life by talkin' about 'em.

"It often makes me feel right sorry for other folks when I see 'em set to tasks they warn't never made for. Hit's a lot easier to cry down another feller's work, and tell jest how he ort to have did it, than 'tis to 'tend to your own, an' do it half-way well."

It was said by the patrons of the new Wagon-Tire House that the table talk at that hotel, the sight of Aunt Huldy's cheery face and the sound of her hearty voice, made up for many deficiencies.

It was Kid Barringer who attempted once, at dinner, to explain the Darwinian theory to Aunt Huldah.

"Come down from monkeys, did we?" she inquired with deep interest. "Well, some of us hain't come so very fur, neither."

There was a guffaw of delight over this conclusion, in which the Kid himself joined. Later he added further explanations; and Huldah listened respectfully.

"Yes—s'pose—likely," she agreed. "Them's mighty fine dictionary words you 're a-sayin', Kid, an' you can sure say 'em splendid. I do love education; but in this partic'lar matter, I don't see as it makes nigh as much difference where we come from as it does where we 're a-goin' at."

This closed the argument, and science was not thereafter obtruded upon Huldah's notice.

There was a Mexican hired for the kitchen work, or a Chinaman, or whatever the mistress of the house could secure, all the incumbents being temporary, and so regarded by her. Yet this left Sissy with more time, since she had only to wait at table and help Aunt Huldah with the cleaning up.

Now there was leisure for the arranging of a matter which had sometimes troubled Huldah greatly. The children were getting nothing in the way of book-learning. When she first heard that the lady from Georgia had taught a little country school in her own home, she began agitating the question of having her instruct the



youth of Blowout in the little plank church building.

The search for the errant husband languished. It might have been guessed that Troy Gilbert did not prosecute it with great vigor. The man was not a criminal; the sheriff's good offices in locating him could be claimed only by courtesy. Now that one talked, face to face, with Luceria Patterson of the man she had come to seek, she was fain to admit that he had left his home in Georgia after distressing scenes with herself and her "folks"; he might almost have been said to have left upon their advice. It was plain to Huldah that much of the animus of that letter, over which she and Troy had wondered, was due to these same "folks". She hoped, sometimes, that the western journey was undertaken more from the wife's own motion, and with a better motive.

So the lady from Georgia settled down to the business of life, for the time, as teacher of the small school in Blowout.

Huldah, herself, was not one to find leisure anywhere. Her duties were expansible, and always filled every chink and cranny of her time. Even with the added opportunity for earning, she was often pressed for funds. There was one of her old boys on some distant ranch, whom she was helping to get books; or there was a girl she





had been able to mother for a brief time, who was "having it hard" in some large town, and must not be allowed to come to grief for lack of a helping hand. All those who had once known her kindness invariably wrote to Aunt Huldah when they were sick or in trouble, and she always gave the assistance she thought they deserved.

"I've got more'n I need—till I've used up what I've got," she observed, easily. But to meet all calls she was frequently obliged to assess her boarders, and she cheerily did so.

"The Lord give each human two hands, to show that he was expected to carry both arms of his cross," she used to say. "You dast ask fer help fer others (that's what I'm a-doin', askin' help fer a pore sick feller) but you take your two hands and lay hold of your own cross, and tote it, like the fust cross was toted."

Huldah was particularly pitiful of the sins of drunkards.

"They ain't no use beatin' 'em down," she always urged. "The drink has dragged 'em low enough. Love 'em an' trust 'em, ef you can. Ef you can't love 'em an' trust 'em, for God's sake, leave 'em alone."

This, or some variation of it, was her reply to those who thought it strange that she should continue to countenance Lone Deatherage. Death-

erage was a silent man, a quiet, peaceable fellow at most times, but one who became a dangerous lunatic with drink, and whose every spree closed with an illness which, it seemed, would end his life. When one of his sprees occurred in Blow-out, the Wagon-Tire House was his unfailing asylum, and Aunt Huldah his faithful nurse.

"I wonder at you," said Gilbert, meeting her on the street soon after his own exodus from the hotel and her assumption of its management. "I think you're very inconsistent. Here you are, hammering away at me every time you see me," —Huldah smiled rather broadly at this exaggeration—"because I keep a saloon—and a decent saloon. Why, I wouldn't sell a drop of liquor to such a man as Lone Deatherage; and yet you have him brought in there, where you're worked to death, and 'tend on him like he was the president, when he simply made himself sick by his own meanness."

"Now Gib—now Gib!" Aunt Huldah returned. "I reckon your barkeep sells a jug o' liquor to anybody 'at comes for it. Maybe you wouldn't let pore Lone drink in your place; but I don't see that it makes any difference. You're sellin' death an' damnation over your counter; an' pore Lone, he's one o' the many boys 'at's a-buyin' death an' damnation, an' perishin' from it."



Gilbert stalked on with his head very high—above a doubtful heart.

There was not a cowboy that stopped at the Wagon-Tire House, during the week that Lone Deatherage lay tossing with fever in one of its rooms, but felt privileged to offer Huldah advice. She was not one usually to need counsel; but here was a subject upon which she had made herself fallible and open to their criticism. The usual formula was:

"Looks like 'tain't no credit to you an' your house an' these here orphan chil'en,—an' Miz' Patterson,—to take in sech a plumb sot as Deatherage. Folks might say it's jest like old Kansas Charlie used to have it—sech a plumb sot as Lone!"

And Huldah always answered in her most cheery tone:

"Law, child! you needn't to pester yourse'f. Pore Lone, he's jest sick now. He ain't goin' to drink no more. This is p'intedly his last spree."

If the objection followed, "That's what you said last time," it was answered, with yet greater cheeriness, "Did I? Reckon likely I did. An' hit's what I'm a-goin' to say next time—ef there should be a next time."

Gilbert closed the chorus with another appeal to Aunt Huldah to leave off her intemperate



weakness for Lone Deatherage and his sorrows, and turn the fellow out. It was one evening when, hungry for the old woman's companionship, he stopped to chat a moment as she sat alone on the narrow back porch.

"Gib," interrupted Huldah, suddenly, "you don't understand one word o' what you're talkin' about, boy. See, I've lived a good bit longer than you have, an' I've lived a good bit more while I was about it. Sometimes I think men—'specially if they're right well-doin', good sort o' fellers—don't git a fair chance at the big lessons o' life."

"I know enough about men," Gilbert answered authoritatively, "to tell you that Lone Deatherage never was any account, and never will be. You might as well give him up."



CHAPTER VI

"GILBERT—GILBERT!"

"She's put on pilgrim's attire,
'Gilbert—Gilbert!' is her cry,
She seeks him far, she seeks him near,
There's none may her deny."

She had been standing there by the wayside, a forlorn little figure, almost immovable, since very early morning. It was now eight o'clock, and the Texas dust—there is none more pervasive—had sifted white all over her. It lay thick in the folds of her black garments, and powdered even her long, curling eyelashes.

Suddenly, she turned her head. There was the rattle of a vehicle and the steady thud of trotting ponies; and as she stepped doubtfully forward, the Cañon City stage drew up beside her and stopped. The driver evidently asked if she wished to go to Cañon City, though the noise of the stoppage drowned his voice.

She made a hasty, almost stealthy movement toward the vehicle, and then shrank back with a half-stifled cry. The two men who were its only



occupants had sprung out, and doffing their hats, contended for the honor of helping her into the stage. But even the simple and robust chivalry which flourishes on the western frontier was abashed before the face of terror she turned upon them.

It would have been a pretty little face, had it not been so gray with fear. As the men drew back she darted between them and climbed into the vehicle, forgetting her bag, which one of them picked up and presented to her with an elaborate bow and a polite observation. He was rewarded with a terrified glance, and a half-whispered, "Thank you".

The two men climbed to their seats, and the stage rattled away. As mile after mile of level, dusty road unrolled itself beneath the ponies' tireless feet, the cowboys made several awkward and solicitous endeavors to address the girl; but she crouched, rather than sat, on the seat, looking back as though she feared pursuit, and answered in monosyllables when she answered at all. Perplexed and disconcerted, they finally gave up the attempt and began talking to each other. Their conversation ran upon a recent saloon fracas.

"Gilbert, he ain't afraid of nothin'," concluded the cowboy in the stiff, steeple-crowned sombrero.



"That's sure," returned he of the soft crown and flapping brim. "I've saw him up ag'in' the worst men thishyer neighborhood kin purjuce (and thishyer neighborhood ain't no slouch in purjucin' of bad men, neither) and I hain't never saw him skeered yet."

"He don't fear the face of man, Gilbert don't," cut in Billy Bascom, from the driver's seat.

They were approaching a small rise or divide, and the ponies had dropped to a walk.

"Gilbert, he reminds me," remarked the cowboy who had last spoken, "of that there old historical character who is said to have remarked, 'Fear, who's he? I hain't never met him'."

Several times during this conversation, the girl, who was listening eagerly, had started forward as though to interrupt or ask a question. Now, she called sharply to the driver, "I want to get out here."

"Why, shorely, Miss, shorely!" returned old Billy, reining his ponies up short.

The two cowboys leaped down, as before, but the girl had scrambled over the wheel, and was standing, dazed, where a little path left the road and mounted the divide leading toward a cluster of houses a quarter of a mile to the left.

"Is that the way?" she inquired of Bascom, pointing where the path led.



"The way to whur, Miss? That there's Blowout. Are you aimin' to go to see anybody in Blowout?"

"I want to find Gilbert—" began the girl; but at the sound of a horseman galloping down the stage road she turned and fled swiftly and silently along the little path, between the stunted plum bushes.

The three men gazed after her a moment in blank amazement.

"That shore is a timid female," remarked Billy, as he gathered up his lines.

"Which she hain't never paid her way," added Eldom Bayliss, of the steeple crown, as he climbed thoughtfully into the stage.

"And I'd be proud to pay you for the pore little critter myself, Billy," remarked the other.

"Like enough we gets her ag'in where the road swings around past Blowout. She's left her gripsack," answered Uncle Billy; for the path the girl had taken was only a short cut to that place.

She toiled up the sandy way, panting and looking back, whispering over and over to herself, "Gilbert! Gilbert! I must find Gilbert. Gilbert's not afraid of anything. And oh!" with a gasping sob, "I'm so afraid of everything."

She had eaten nothing since noon the day before, and her knees shook under her. When she



came into what answered for the main street of the little town it was high noon, and the sunny, open way was deserted, except for an old Mexican who slumbered peacefully beside a dinner pail in front of one of the houses. He roused himself as her shadow fell on him.

"Gilbert! Gilbert!" she cried in the same hurried, preoccupied tones. "I want to find Gilbert, because he isn't afraid of anything."

The Mexican raised himself and pointed, with a sweeping and not ungraceful gesture, to where, upon the square front of a little frame shack, were the words, "The Roundup. Troy Gilbert."

She hurried forward and entered the place. After the hot sunny street, the room was quite dark, cool and empty. Behind the counter a Mexican lad polished tumblers. At one corner a tall, fresh-colored young man, in his shirt-sleeves, was writing in a book of accounts. She clung swaying to the counter, and made her request of the latter; but her voice, broken with little pitiful sobs, faltered so much that he could hardly catch a word.

Leaning far forward to her, smiling encouragingly as to a timid child, he inquired:

"What is it, sissy—what is it, honey? Did you want to see—"

Then he broke off, laid his hand upon the

counter and sprang across in a clean jump, just in time to catch the girl as she fell.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated. Presently he added wonderingly: "It appeared to me that she was asking for me, by name."

He reached up with one hand, still holding her head and shoulders lightly on his arm, and drew forward the pitcher of cool water which stood on the bar. Then with considerably more difficulty, he got a big, fine, linen handkerchief from his hip pocket, and, while the young Mexican looked on silently and respectfully, bathed her face with it. For some time he was entirely absorbed in his ministrations; but by and by he began to realize that she was not, as he had at first thought, a child, but a young woman.

Here was certainly a strange predicament.

"What on earth shall I do with her?" he murmured, when he saw her big blue eyes unclose suddenly, as she came somewhat to consciousness. A week before, such a question would never have occurred to him; it would have been Aunt Huldah and the Wagon-Tire House, of course.

The girl touched his arm, looking up into his face with a gaze that was heart-breaking.

"I want Gilbert," she moaned. "I'm so afraid



—and Gilbert isn't afraid of anything. Oh, I want him—I must find Gilbert!"

"That's all right—that's all right," he reassured her gently. "You needn't be scared. I'm Gilbert; and I'm not going to let anything hurt you."

He was in mortal fear that some customer would come in for a drink, see the girl there, and misinterpret her presence. Teofilo, the Mexican lad, was like his own hand to Troy Gilbert; he was as easy about the opinions of the one as of the other. But a customer would be a different matter. Now, in his secret heart, more strongly than ever before, but not at all for the first time, he realized why a good man could not keep a saloon. He lifted her to a chair and stood looking down at her, crimson with shame at the thought that his place of business was one which it would disgrace this young girl to be seen entering or leaving.

Her pretty head drooped, and she began to moan softly: "There were two of them—and they got on horses. Sometimes they were on horses—and sometimes they were running up the stairs. Oh, I'm so frightened! I'm so afraid!"

Troy's resolution was suddenly taken.

"Could you walk a little now, do you think? I want to get you across the street. There's a—



a good, kind woman over there—and she'll take care of you."

The sound of his voice seemed to reassure the girl, who rose obediently, as he helped her; and he half carried her across the street to the Wagon-Tire House.



CHAPTER VII

THE SICK GIRL

"The lady of his love;—oh! she was changed
As by the sickness of the soul; her mind
Had wander'd from its dwelling, and her eyes
They had not their own lustre, but the look
Which is not of the earth."

Dinner was over; the boarders were gone; Mrs. Patterson and the younger children were at school. Sissy, who was oftener kept at home than Aunt Huldah wished, was in the kitchen helping the Mexican woman get ready for the advent of the stage. There was no one to stare or wonder as Troy Gilbert took the sick girl across the street. Huldah herself met them at the door. The new-comer had pulled a dusty veil down over her face, and she was still looking back as though she feared pursuit.

"Aunt Huldy, you're mad at me," began Gilbert.

"No, I'm not," Huldah interrupted promptly; "I'm as mad as pizen at yer business; but I ain't mad at you a speck."

"Then maybe you'll help me here." He turned



toward the girl, hesitated, swallowed, realized that he had no name by which to call her, and went on: "This young lady came into my place about five minutes ago, and—and she fainted."

"Um-m," was Aunt Huldah's sole comment, as she looked keenly, though not unkindly, from one to the other. "Best bring her in the parlor. Git a cheer for her, Gib."

The girl seemed loath to let the young man's arm go. When she was seated and he moved a little aside to speak more freely with Huldah, she cried softly, "Gilbert—Gilbert! I'm looking for Gilbert! Don't leave me, Gilbert!"

Huldah gave no sign of hearing, or of noting the agony of embarrassment into which the words threw Troy. "Sick?" she inquired kindly.

"Why, I don't know," Gilbert returned defensively, "I don't know any more than you see. She come into my place about five minutes ago and fainted," he repeated.

"Where'd she come from? How'd she come? The stage ain't in yet," remarked Huldah.

"I don't know no more than I tell you," Gilbert persisted.

"Well, she's here, anyhow," Huldah said. "What is it you want of me?"

"There ain't no place in town, you know, where I could take her—a lady, like she is, poor little



soul—nobody in Blowout that would be—that could protect her and make it right for her, but you. I don't suppose your being mad with my business will keep you from takin' her in, will it?" he finished, in a rather aggressive whisper.

"Troy Gilbert," Huldah returned with perfect good-humor, "the idea of you—of all people—sayin' sech a thing as that to me! You know I'm not goin' to refuse to take anybody into my house that ought to come in." Gess and Tell, come home from school on some errand, here presented wondering, freckled faces at the door. She sent them to the right about, with, "Run along, chil'en. Gess, you go ask Sissy to see if she can't fix some ice-water for this lady. Gib, I b'lieve she's overcome by the heat. Don't often happen out here; but I b'lieve she is."

All this time Huldah was taking the now almost unconscious girl into her own room, placing her in a chair, gently unpinning the dusty black hat and laying it off. Such a world of ashen blonde hair came down with the unfastening of the hat, that the elder woman exclaimed in admiration, as she smoothed its crinkles with a wetted hairbrush, and braided it deftly in two plaits for what she foresaw would be a sick-bed.

"Don't *you* know what's the matter with her?" she asked abruptly.



"I couldn't understand what she said when she first came in; but it seemed as though she was asking for me," Troy said.

"It appears likely," responded Huldah, briefly. "Her a-goin' into your place, and what she said a while ago, would shorely look as if she was a-seekin' for you."

She motioned Gilbert aside, raised the dusty little figure and laid it on her bed. Troy was beginning a defensive speech, when the stage drew up at the door of the Wagon-Tire House with an inspiriting rattle.

"You go out an' speak to them men," Huldah counseled. "I'll 'tend to this child here. She'll feel a sight better when I get her face and hands bathed, and a fresh wrapper on her."

Left alone with the girl, who continued in a half-insensible condition, Huldah busied herself with skilled ministrations, interspersed with little exclamations of pity and assurance—the young creature was so pretty, so fragile-looking, so daintily refined in every line and in all her belongings.

Huldah put one of Mrs. Patterson's lawn wrappers on the new-comer. "I'll ast her afterwards," she reflected. "Miz' Patterson's a good soul, and she'd like to do fer folks, if she only thought about it in time."



Then came little Sissy wondering at the door, and exclaiming over the beauty of the poor sick lady, as she brought in the pitcher of ice-water.

"Honey, you jest set right down there by the bed and keep this wet cloth a-goin' on her hands an' face, and fan her between-whiles. I'm a-goin' out to scald some milk fer her," Huldah said.

As she passed through the hall, Uncle Billy presented the small bag, and inquired timidly from the doorstep where he sat, between the two cowboys:

"Gilbert's friend get here all right?"

"She's here," answered Huldah, briefly, as she took the bag.

"Said she was lookin' fer Gib, an' I told her where she'd find him. Some relation?" hazarded Billy, yet more timidly.

"She's his aunt's husband's second cousin," replied Aunt Huldah, sedately, and left the two cowboys roaring with laughter, even Billy himself joining in.

When Huldah came back to her patient, and sent Sissy out to wait on table for Billy and his passengers, she found the new-comer staring about the room with large, scared eyes.

"Who was that?" she whispered, as Sissy went out. "Oh, I'm frightened—the dream—the ugly dream—it's coming back! I want Gilbert. I



want Gilbert. Gilbert's not afraid of anything. I must—I must go and find Gilbert."

Huldah brought the milk forward, and tried with silent and skilled gentleness to feed her patient; but the tears rolled down the pale little cheeks, and the young girl begged so pitifully for Gilbert that the older woman finally set the tumbler down, called Sissy, and went, herself, across the street.

"I want you, Gib," she said, putting her head in at the saloon door.

A man drinking at the counter dropped his glass with a start. Gilbert hurried out and followed her.

"What is it?" he asked apprehensively, as they walked. "Is"—and he eyed her sidewise in alarm—"is anything the matter?"

"*Is* anything the matter?" echoed Aunt Huldah. "Gib—child—I have knowed you, man and boy, for nigh eleven year. A person may say I've raised ye. And now you go and cut up a trick like this—and ast, 'Is anything the matter'!"

"Why, Aunt Huldy! I never saw this young lady before she walked into my sal—my place of business."

"What's her name?" asked Huldah. "They wasn't nothin' on the grip Billy give me—ner much in it, neither."



"I don't know," Gilbert protested. "I wish I did. I swear to you, Aunt Huldy, I never saw her until she came into my place and fainted."

"Gib—ef I'm to help you—or, what's a lot more to the p'int, help her—you'll have to— See here, what was she lookin' fer you fer? Why is she cryin' her pretty eyes out fer you over at my house now, and won't eat a mouthful till you come and feed it to her?"

"I'm sure I don't know," returned Gilbert, feebly; and even to Huldah's optimistic eye he looked the very picture of detected guilt.

"Pore baby—pore little foolish baby! Gilbert, I didn't think it of you!" fiercely; and then, as the tears rolled unregarded off her nose, "Who sent her lookin' fer you, ef you don't know her name and never saw her; jest tell me that, Gib?"

"Why, I'm sure I don't know," repeated Gilbert, yet more feebly. "What I tell you is the truth; but it don't seem so very likely, does it?"

"Well, I should think not," returned Huldah. "I'd ruther you wouldn't say it ag'in, ef it's jest the same to you. We'll do what we can for the child till she can come to herself enough to tell her name, as long as you say you don't know it."

They found their patient crouched on her bed, shivering and staring at Sissy in a panic of fear. Despite the color which he could see his every



movement and every word must give to Huldah's understanding of the situation, Gilbert went forward manfully. He spoke to the sick girl as if she had been a little child.

"Here's Gilbert. Come now, honey," he said; "won't you take some of this nice milk—to please Gilbert?"

And she turned and clutched his arm with both small hands.

"Oh, it's Gilbert!" she cried; "and Gilbert's not afraid of anything. Yes," with a sob, "you feed me, Gilbert; I'm so hungry." And he fed her awkwardly, but gently, talking to her in short sentences, soothingly, as one would to an ailing babe.

When she had eaten, she lay down with a little weary sigh, and, still holding to his coat sleeve, fell asleep.

The big fellow sat, the cup yet in his hand, and looked long at the small, pale face, swallowing hard, then turned and asked softly:

"What's the matter with her, Aunt Huldy?" as the tired eyes closed.

"She's got dengue, as near as I can make out," returned Huldah, briefly,—"a walkin' case."

"Then she's out of her head!" exclaimed Troy, hopefully. "I told you I didn't know her, that I never saw her before. She seems to have



known some one by the name of Gilbert that she thought a good deal of, don't she?"

Huldah turned and looked at Gilbert. The big helpless fellow blushed.

"Poor little thing! How pretty she is!" he murmured a moment later; and they sat a long time in silence, looking at the girl, Huldah with the ready tears dimming her gaze.

"Is she going to be very sick?" asked Gilbert, finally.

"I hope not, so very. I've nursed a lot of dengue," answered Huldah. "I should say the worst of it was over. But she's had a scare of some sort, and been traveling around when she'd ort to have been in bed. I'll take care of her. She's asleep now; I reckon you can go."

"Gilbert's cousin," as Huldah called her, lay sick for three weeks. She was never violently or dangerously ill; but the delirium held her. Her paroxysms of fear were most pitiful and distressing; and when they were the worst, some one always hurried across the street to bring Gilbert. The sight of him, the sound of his voice, the touch of his hand, always quieted her. Mrs. Patterson, as Huldah said, "come out wonderful," and gave to nursing every moment she could spare from school.

When the sick girl had been three weeks at



The sight of him, the sound of his voice, the touch of his hand, always quieted her.—PAGE 82







the Wagon-Tire House, Troy Gilbert made his peace with his old friend. He was needed so continually at the bedside of the sufferer that the elder woman suggested it would be more convenient for all parties if he should return to his old boarding place in the hotel.

"Well, Aunt Huldy, I'd be glad enough to come back. I haven't given *you* up, you know."

Huldah laid a loving hand upon the tall man's arm, and stood looking at him.

"You didn't feel like you needed to, did you, Troy? I ain't kep' no saloon—ner done anything that grieves your sperrit, have I?"

"Well, then, Aunt Huldy—" and it went against the grain with the obstinate young fellow to say it—"I'm willing to come back on sufferance, if that's what you're trying to rub in on me. I reckon you're more than half right about the saloon business, and when I get rich I'll quit it."

Wise Aunt Huldah knew that several things had happened of late that had been enough to disgust as good a man as Troy Gilbert with the business he was doing. She left the leaven to work, and answered cheerily:

"I'll be jest as glad to have ye as I ever would —but I sha'n't want you at all, Gib, after you get rich at keepin' a saloon. You talk about makin' up your mind to quit it: do you know how a



man makes up his mind? He makes it up jest like a boy gatherin' stones makes up a stone heap. He adds a little to that mind he's makin' up, every day, by what he does in that day. You hain't got a saloon-keeper's mind now. But the way you're makin' up your mind, you know, you'll *have* a saloon-keeper's mind in about twenty years; and I reckon that won't be the mind to quit, rich or not rich."

"Aunt Huldy," said Troy, laughing, as he turned away, "you ought to have been a lawyer—or a preacher; you're great on argument."

But her words followed him back to the saloon, which the Mexican lad was now attending to under Gilbert's supervision, the barkeeper being ill. They said themselves over in one form or another, for many days, till—not being troubled or confused by many others of the same sort from the same source—they were permitted in their own good time to bear fruit.



CHAPTER VIII

HULDAH'S OWN STORY

"Of my merit
On thet p'int you yourself may jedge;
All is, I never drink no sperit,
Nor I hain't never signed no pledge."

"Troy," Huldah said softly, "I guess I'll have to tell you about my husband, Tracewell Sarvice."

Gilbert did not interrupt her. No one in Blow-out had ever heard Huldah Sarvice allude to the husband and children whom she had lost more than twenty-five years before.

"You see it was this way: Trace, he was of a better family than mine, an' he was well book-l'arnt, for the time an' place. He was an awful pretty man—I can see his face many a time now, jest as plain, when I git to studyin' about them old times—and the sweetest dispositioned creature—I reckon there never was a kinder tempered man in the world than my Trace. Everybody told me when I married him that he would drink. I took him with the fault on him; I knowed all about it, and that it run in the family, and come



from father to son. I hadn't a bit of excuse for takin' on about it like I did afterwards.

"He was as much in love with me as I was with him; an', pore young fool, I got him to go down on his knees beside me, and promise God—along with me—that he'd never drink another drop after we was married."

"Well," began Gilbert, rather aggressively, "I don't see but what that was a good thing for you to do. A man ought to keep a promise like that."

"Oh, Gib—Gib! I told you that I was considerable older than what you be! What in the nation was the use o' me bein' in it at all? Ef pore Trace wanted to quit drinkin'—an' wanted to tell God so—what was *I* there for? He *didn't* want to quit. He hadn't got to where he was ready to go to his Maker an' say so. He jest wanted a gal 'at wanted him—an' wouldn't take him without all this talk—this foolish talk."

"Well, Aunt Huldy, if he broke a promise like that, I think you had a good reason to feel—"

"Good reason!" Huldah echoed. "Oh, yes, I felt all the var'us ways that women do feel when they're tryin' to reform somebody. Mostly, I felt that I was the wust abused critter in the world, an' like I hadn't a fault on earth o' my own to reform.



"Well, he did drink, Trace did, right away; on the sly at first, and then some pretty bad sprees, 'cause he was so scared an' onhappy at findin' 'at he couldn't quit. We'd have reg'lar times. I never give him a cross word—I'm glad to remember that; but I'd set up an' boo-hoo like it was me 'at was a-doin' the drinkin'. An' I lost flesh, an' it looked like I'd p'intedly go into a decline. An' everybody bragged on me fer it, an' talked like I was a blessed martyr. Pore Trace, he said so, most of anybody; used to say that ef a man with a wife like he'd got couldn't keep away from drink, he'd ort to be shot, an' all sich as that."

"True enough, too!" muttered Gilbert.

"Hmm, well, yes," Huldah returned doubtfully. "Maybe so—maybe so; but I believe ef I had a wife like Trace had then, it would jest drive me to drink. Honey, it's a heap better to seek what you like than to run from what you fear. Ef I'd set up some other thing to study on, an he'ped my pore boy to'des it, 'stead o' fillin' up all both our lives with fear and tremblin', an' talkin' 'bout the curse o' liquor, an' how horrible 'twas that he couldn't quit, an' always suspectin' 'at he was a-goin' to bu'st out—when, maybe, at that partic'lar time, he wasn't—I know I'd a done better.



"Why, son, we jest et and drunk and lived reformin' all our days. Then, you know, I got between him an' himself, I got between him an' God. He wasn't a-promisin' himself 'at he'd quit liquor—he was a-promisin' me. He wasn't even promisin' God—that must be done when I was there. I sorter took him to God, like I was the one 'at knowed the Lord, almost like I was God, myself. Oh, it's a mis'able business, tryin' to do somebody else's reformin' fer 'em! P'int 'em the way; ast 'em, cheery, ef they don't think that's a beautiful way to walk in, ef they don't think they'd be happy thar'; an' then you go off by yourself, an' pray God 'at they'll choose it; fer ontell they *do* choose it—tell they *choose* it, Gib—they ain't one bit o' use o' you tryin' to choose it *fer* 'em."

Troy was silent, looking down at the pebbles at his feet. He was suddenly aware that this was why generous-hearted, loving Aunt Huldah had so curtly "given him up", instead of laboring daily with him upon the evils of saloon-keeping. He was, rather unwillingly, sure that what she had done had had more effect on him than many long sermons upon the evils of his business.

He raised his glance to find Huldah's brown, wrinkled face, with its ever-young eyes, set toward the horizon, where the full moon was com-



ing up. Her voice dropped to a lower tone as she went on:

"That's about all. After the babies come, pore Trace tried harder than ever—and failed worse. We come to Texas, mostly because I was heart-sick and ashamed, and onwilling to face my kin and my friends with a drunken husband. I used to pizen his days and mine by talkin', an' lettin' him talk, of me bein' a drunkard's wife and the boys a drunkard's chil'en. Hit was a lie—that was a lie. I was *makin'* a drunkard of him as fast as I could; but he wasn't that, then.

"After we come out here he had dengue, like the little girl in there, and he was pretty sick. We was where the water was bad, and everybody put whisky in it. I jest r'ared an' whooped about that. I acted the fool. Of course I know now it's better to boil the water than to put whisky in it; but then, I never stopped to reason whether much might be done or little; I jest lit in to make a fool o' myse'f, an' tell every person that spoke to me about it that my husband drank and couldn't be trusted, an' we dassent have whisky put in the drinkin' water or he'd drink himself to death in no time. Don't seem to me now like I ever could of been sech a fool; but when you come to sum it up, that's about what I said



an' did—an' I wonder my neighbors didn't despise me."

Over Gilbert's mind came the memory of numerous women he had known whose sole pursuit in life was the reformation of an erring husband. Somehow Aunt Huldah's talk threw a new light upon the attitude of these women, who had always had his sympathy and approval; and he realized that there was error mixed with the very fiber of their love.

"Well, that was the worst of my behavior, and it come just before I saw the light, as I see it today. 'Twas was lyin' pretty sick from dengue—a relapse; an' I'd thort, before, that was the very time to keep liquor away from him. He begged for it most pitiful the fu'st time he was sick, and the doctor he ordered that he should have it; but I wouldn't give it to him, an' I got off all this talk to the doctor about 'Ruther he'd die than live to be a drunkard,' an' sich—like it was my part to say whether he should live or die, any more than to say whether he should be a drunkard or not.

"When this relapse come, I went off to myse'f and prayed jest what I ort to 'a' done in the first place—an' it seems the Lord give me light—light that has never departed from me. I seen that this matter belonged to my pore husband

and to God; that ef I didn't want to be a drunkard's wife, I could say so—could 'a' said so before I married him—could 'a' said so any day since I married him, an' *quit* bein' a drunkard's wife; but as for sayin' to another human bein', 'You got to do this, an' you got to do that, 'cause I think it's right, an' you ort to think it's right'—w'y, no good could come of it.

"I went back to the bedroom, an' I took the bottle of whisky the doctor had brought, an' begged me to use, and I fixed a toddy. When Trace woke up—he was asleep then—I says to him, 'Honey, I fixed you a nice little toddy here—see ef it's sweet enough fer you.'

"He looked at me right scared, an' he shut his lips together, like he's afraid I'd give it to him whether he would or no. 'W'y, Huldy—w'y, Huldy!' he says, 'you offerin' whisky to me? You know what whisky does to me—you know what a mis'able—'

"He was goin' on with a lot o' that kind o' talk 'at had always been put in his mouth—the kind him an' me had been a-havin'—when I stopped him mighty gentle, an' I says to him:

" 'Trace, you're the best man in the world, an' my husband. Ef the doctor says you ort to have whisky, w'y, you're man enough to take it now, as a medicine, an' to let it alone when you git up.



I'll trust you,' I says. That's what I told him, then, an' a hundred times after, 'I'll trust you.' "

"And what came of it, Aunt Huldy?"

"Oh, law, dear child! what ever does come o' love an' trust, but honor an' peace?"

"You don't mean to say that you reformed him?"

Huldah smiled at the youthful crudeness of this view.

"No, I don't mean to say that 'twas my love an' trust alone that reformed Trace; but I do mean to say that my love an' trust let him reform hisself, an' he'ped him to do it. It didn't all come at once; merricles don't in this world, nowadays. He begun by makin' the doctor awful mad sayin' he wouldn't touch liquor durin' his sickness. I know now that it was all right; the teas and stuff that I use, an' that I used then, is better fer a fever patient than any liquor; but neither me ner Trace thought so; an' that was the first fruits of my trustin' him, fer him to go ag'in the doctor an' push them toddies away.

"After he was up—well—we had some little relapses that wasn't dengue. But I'd got the hang o' the thing then. When he'd come to me jest broke down an' ready to crawl, an' sayin', 'I'm no account. Oh, it's awful—I been drinkin' ag'in, Huldy!' instead o' bu'stin' right out into



tears an' havin' a mournful season, I'd speak up cheerful an' say, 'Well, well, you won't do it next time. You've got the strength; an' when you ain't got it yourself, you know where to go fer it. You're the best man 'at ever was, Trace; an' ef you don't want to drink, w'y (with a few little interruptions like this), you're a-goin' to git over the drinkin' habit.'

"You see, up to that time, I had starved his self-respect tell it was jest like a livin' skeleton—"

"I think he'd starved it," Troy interrupted. "I don't see how a man that drinks can respect himself."

"Well,"—Huldah smiled, as though to herself—"well, say we'd starved it betwixt us; and now I set in to fatten it up. I told him every good thing that was true about himself; an' I told him every good thing 'at I hoped was goin' to be true. An' when he come to me with fault an' failure, I made small of 'em. I let on like I thought they was in the past, an' he was not likely to turn to 'em ag'in. Soon as he got his health, an' I got rid o' the feelin' o' scare—an' got him rid of it—w'y, you couldn't have wanted a soberer man than my husband.

"That's all I know, Gib, 'bout reformin' folks. I jedge that pore Lone Deatherage hain't got nobody on airth to trust him, but me. An' jest so



long as he's a good, kind-hearted feller, like he is, generous with his last cent, ready to give, full o' love fer little chil'en, never sayin' no harm o' any mortal man"—she stole a look at Gilbert's face, for she held self-righteousness to be one of his sins—"so long as he's thataway, w'y, I'm a-goin' to hang to him."



CHAPTER IX

DAISY

"Her eyes were like the wave within;
Like water-reeds the poise
Of her soft body, dainty-thin;
And like the water's noise
Her plaintive voice."

The young girl whom Gilbert had brought to the Wagon-Tire House was indeed suffering from dengue. Yet Huldah found herself continually puzzled by symptoms which showed that the patient had sustained a great nervous shock just before, or during the time she was taking the fever. There was always a suggestion that the mental cloud was not simply the temporary delirium of fever; and she dreaded that it would not lift when the fever passed.

There was no physician in Blowout, none nearer than Emerald, and the doctor there was a man whom Huldah Sarvice was not inclined to trust as much as she trusted her own nursing. So she promptly declined Gilbert's offer to bring him over.

It was a difficult position for the young man.



Aware that every effort he put forward, every mark he showed of the tenderness he was beginning to feel for the sick girl, must convince his best friend, Huldah Sarvice, that he was blameworthy toward the new-comer, yet he did not check himself, but came always when he was summoned to quiet her paroxysms of fear, and even kept himself free from every trip or engagement which would have taken him beyond the reach of such calls. Now he sent his eager deputy sheriff upon business that had been his own special pride and delight.

During the first week it was "Gilbert—Gilbert!" all day long. Huldah would take the little trembling sufferer in her arms, and soothe and coax; but nothing save the presence of the big tall fellow whose name she called seemed to satisfy her.

Yet so soon as he sat beside her bed and held her hand, murmuring, "Here's Gilbert, now, little girl. Gilbert has come, and he's not afraid of anything—that's right—he ain't scared one bit, and he won't let anything hurt you," she would fall peacefully asleep, or take the nourishment she had been refusing.

After a week of this sort of thing, Troy Gilbert's heart was as butter toward Huldah Sarvice



—so good a nurse, so kind, so tender, so stanch a friend. She had smoothed the matter for him on the outside, till there were no jesting inquiries; she never gave him so much as a look that hinted what she herself must have believed. Mrs. Patterson, even, had been told little, and that little in such a way that she asked no more.

Feeling thus, he longed to have her attack him about the saloon. He yearned to be given an opportunity to say, "Well, I think it's all right; but if it doesn't please you, I'm willing to give it up."

And just this was what Huldah Sarvice did not want him to say. She looked forward to the time when he should give up the saloon because he thought of it exactly as she did; and she guessed that her best ally was the sick girl.

Huldah and Mrs. Patterson had addressed the patient as "Dearie" and "Pet" till the first day she sat up, since an inquiry for her name always brought tears. But this day, arrayed in a dainty pink wrapper, propped in a big rocking chair, with a gay quilt spread over her knees, the young girl played hostess and invited Gilbert to take his dinner with her from her small bedside table.

"Well!" he cried, looking approvingly at the small figure in the chair, "my little friend is



'most well, isn't she? And she looks so nice, doesn't she, Aunt Huldah? She's a regular daisy."

"Yes," said the pale girl, nodding her head with its wealth of little close blonde curls—Aunt Huldah had been obliged to cut off the long fair braids—"yes, that's mother's name for me—Daisy."

And Daisy she had been, from that time on, till Troy came over late one evening to have his supper alone with his old friend, and announced that he had found out who the patient was. He sat alone at the long table, while Huldah served him, and explained.

"She's old man Sargent's daughter, from over beyond Twelve Mile. You knew Sargent, didn't you, Aunt Huldy?"

"Yes, I knew him," his listener agreed doubtfully. "But I couldn't—w'y, I couldn't hardly s'pose Daisy was his daughter. And the boys—reelly, Gib, I don't see how she could be a sister to them there boys. Does Sargent claim her?"

"He's dead," returned Troy, briefly. "Billy Bascom was talking to me about it to-day; and I put two and two together, and concluded that he must have been Daisy's father."

"Dead?" echoed Huldah, interrogatively.



"Yes; he was no manner of good," pronounced Gilbert, oracularly; "always mixed up with every rustling, mavericking and brand-altering scrape in the country—"

"Oh, no, Troy; I shouldn't say half as bad as that," Huldah interrupted. "The boys was pretty wild; and the old man—well, he would drink, and it led him into bad company, and maybe into some bad doin's; but he was only fiery-tempered and reckless. He had a good heart, had Jeff Sargent."

Troy looked at her humorously.

"Might have knowed you'd find some good to say for him, Aunt Huldy," he returned. "I reckon when they want somebody to apologize for the Old Boy himself, they'll have to come to you."

Huldah chuckled.

"I shouldn't hesitate to mention that Satan was mighty industrious, ef I was asked," she announced unblushingly.

"Well, it seems old man Sargent had a wife back in Ohio, and him and his wife had parted. She kept the daughter, because 'twas a little thing a heap younger than the boys; and I reckon that's who Daisy is. He came out here with his two sons and went to ranching. Billy says that they



told him, over to Twelve Mile, that about two months ago Sargent's wife died, and the girl came out to find her father.

"They say old man Sargent and his boys had been having it forward and back with Pete Offut's gang. The Sargents said the Offuts had stole cattle of theirs; and the Offuts complained that the Sargents had cut wires in their fences. The daughter had been at Sargent's ranch a day or two—nobody knows for sure that she was there except Lem Overton, the stage-driver, who brought her there. Then Offut's gang went to the Sargent ranch in the night, to do 'em up. They think the shootin' mostly took place in or near the house. Of course the Offuts ain't givin' out any details, and nobody will ever know jest how it was; but as near as could be judged the old man was killed inside the house, and must have been right in plain view of our little girl. Both the boys were killed, too; and if it was Daisy—as I'm right sure it was—"

"I reckon it was," Aunt Huldah interrupted, "an' she was takin' the dengue then, an' must 'a' been right flighty in her head; that's where she got the shock that I've been sayin' all along she had. I reckon she got it all mixed up, an' was scared, an' thought they was after her, an' ran off. She'd be jest enough in her right mind to



think of the stage. An' by her gittin' Billy's stage—the Emerald-Cañon City—it brought her here. But that don't explain how she got your name, Gib."

"No, it doesn't, Aunt Huldah; and I never realized what a comfort it is to have a good woman for your friend, quite so strong as I do now. I can see by your face that you believe every word I've been telling you, and that you believe—jest like I say—that I never saw her till she come into my place that day; but there's nobody else in the world that would."

"Oh, laws!—yes, they would, Gib. Folks ain't so awful ready to impute evil as you think they air," Huldah returned.

"Well, I told Billy that I thought we were on the track of Sargent's daughter, and he'd better bring any of her clothes and belongings they could find in the ranch-house over here. I give him a letter sayin' I'd be responsible, an' I reckon (me bein' sheriff) they'll send 'em."

Daisy gained her physical strength almost at a bound. The crown of bobbing curls made her thin face look thinner, as slender and white and delicately pointed as a new moon. She was exquisitely pretty; yet those clear, soft blue eyes of hers remained the eyes of a young child, timid, unspeculating; for, long after her body was



strong, her mind continued to be oddly clouded.

Huldah seized an early opportunity, in one of her intervals of perfect sanity, to ask her if her name was not Sargent. She answered yes, unhesitatingly, and gave them the address of her friends in Ohio; told them that her trunk with her clothes all packed in it was still at the Sargent ranch, and said she must ask Troy if he would not get it for her. But when Huldah would have questioned her cautiously as to how she first met Gilbert, or how she heard of him, the girl cried pitifully, and said she had always known Gilbert, that Gilbert was not afraid of anything, and that when she got so frightened—so frightened—there was nobody to go to but Gilbert.

Huldah soothed her remorsefully.

"What on earth is the use o' pesterin' the pore little soul! Looks like it's a-goin' to do Gib a heap o' good to wait on her and do fer her—an' it shorely can't do her no harm," she reflected.

The first day that Daisy was able to go into the big dining-room was made a festival at the Wagon-Tire House. Huldah had ten regular boarders, besides the transients; and when Daisy took her place at the long table, she received a small offering from each one, as well as a great deal of bashful but unconcealed admiration.

Huldah chuckled at the sight of Troy Gilbert's anxious face during these ceremonies. He had sent to Fort Worth for flowers, several of which were now at the dainty little lady's throat and belt, and for a monster box of chocolates, whose blue satin gorgeousness quite outshone the other gifts.

"Never you mind, Huldy Sarvice," the old woman said to herself, "hit's a-goin' to teach your boy his lesson. When Daisy gits strong-like in her head, Gib's a-goin' to be ashamed to come about her an' tell her 'at he's keepin' a saloon—I'll bet on it. And then he'll ast hisself whether it ain't time to quit."

When the trunk arrived, it was found to be marked: "Miss Eleanor Sargent, Prestonville, Bradley County, Ohio." Out of it came wonders and mysteries—the belongings of a refined young girl, almost as unfamiliar to the inmates of the Wagon-Tire House as the paraphernalia of an Eastern magician.

Aunt Huldah wondered and exclaimed over the silver fittings for Daisy's dressing-table. Mrs. Patterson indorsed and privately decided to copy many of the frocks and other articles of apparel. Narcissa, who adored Daisy, following her about and waiting on her, hand and foot, firmly believed that there was nothing which could not be con-



jured out of that box, since its generous owner had found in it a piece of pink silk, from which she was constructing a wonderful dress for the pale little mustard-seed of a girl.

Day by day the blue eyes grew less clouded, the plaintive little voice, which had at first been like the chirp of a half-awakened bird, took on new tones of firmness; and Gilbert surprised a look, half-abashed and half-resentful, when Daisy caught herself back in the act of asking for him in her usual familiar fashion.

And so, there drew near the time which should teach Troy Gilbert which side he really desired to be arrayed upon in the world's battle.



CHAPTER X

THE DOCTOR AND THE BABY

"Mother, how still the baby lies,
I can not hear his breath,
I can not see his laughing eyes,
Oh, tell me! Is this death?"

Consternation reigned in the Wagon-Tire House. The baby was sick—very sick. The tire itself was silenced, since its clang troubled the little sufferer.

"Ef he was my own," murmured Huldah, looking down at the little soul lying in her lap—"ef he was my own born child, I'd scrabble through somehow, dependin' on myse'f. Of course he is mine, in a sense—"

And again her beautiful gray eyes studied the little face and form which in these few days had become so thin.

He was such a good baby; he had always been so good. He had never been known to scream and cry, to make night hideous, to whine or fret or droop. Wholesome and harmonious little creature that he was, he even seemed to be on good



terms with his teeth as they came along by ones and twos. Every one in the house adored him, and he had many lovers in the world outside.

When poor Lone Deatherage lay sick in the Wagon-Tire House he had loved the smiling little fellow's presence. His sad eyes had dwelt fondly on the baby where he lay in Sissy's lap, cooing and waggling his dimpled hands, as she sat for hours fanning the sick man.

Now Deatherage came in while Huldah and Sissy and even Daisy took turns at walking up and down the floor with the silent, pining baby (it was Saturday, and Mrs. Patterson was at the Bar 7 for the day) and his heart was rent.

"Aunt Huldy," he appealed, "let me send fer Doc Foster."

"Doc Foster? W'y, Lone,—Foster, he's a good-hearted, well-meanin' feller; he might maybe make out all right to doctor a big two-fisted cowboy; but—"

And her glance led Deatherage's to the tiny face lying upon Daisy's arm.

"No, you're right, Aunt Huldy. Foster won't do. But I'll git you a man ye kin trust. Why, Aunt Huldy, I'll send to Fort Worth—ef it's a question o' the baby's life—"

"Lone," Huldah said quietly, "don't you know no first-rate doctor is a-goin' to jump up



and leave his practice fer two days and more, less'n hit was fer some great person? It sounds big an' mighty promisin' to say we'll send clear to Fort Worth. But after all, it 'd jest be some feller 'at was tryin' to git a little practice—"

And just at this moment Troy Gilbert came hurrying into the room.

"Aunt Huldy," he cried, "Doc McChesney is here! It's a chance in a thousand for the baby. Mr. Carter sent for him—you know they've been thinkin' Carter had heart disease, and he wanted Doc McChesney to examine him. And he's come back through Blowout and stopped to see Jim Denton's boy that broke his leg last week."

McChesney was an ex-army surgeon; a man of birth and family, of superior education and excellent abilities, and one who had had much pride and spirit; but the fine edge had been taken off his character by the negligence, moral and material, that life on the rude frontier is apt to foster. McChesney was a little let down.

Huldah stepped to the door and glanced across where the ex-army surgeon's horse stood tied to the rack in front of the Roundup. Her face fell a little.

"I—I'd ruther have had him before he went into your—your place than after; this is a baby, you know, Gib," she said mildly.



For once Gilbert took no offense. He looked at her, not angrily, only a little reproachfully.

"You might as well say, Aunt Huldy, that you'd ruther have McChesney before he got out of bed than after. You know that a drink is the runnin' gears of most of them old-timers that's summered and wintered it out here on the frontier. He didn't have a thing but one single drink o' whisky in my place. He's better off with that than what he was without it."

Huldah nodded gently.

"All right, Gib—all right, Gib," she said, and sighed; then seemed to remember something and smiled. "Fetch him over," she added cheerily.

McChesney came in, with the quiet, assured bearing of knowledge and experience. He took the little sufferer in his strong, steady hands, and laid him tenderly and skilfully across his knees. His eyes dwelt kindly on the tiny body so justly and perfectly formed, the sweet, frank, fearless baby face.

"A fine boy," he said, "a fine little fellow."

He examined and questioned, and every sound of his calm, cultivated tones, kind, intelligent, reassuring, was cheering to the listeners. Finally, he debated a moment, put the baby back in Huldah's lap and asked for his medicine case, which Deatherage ran to fetch. Then, with the others



standing looking on, he made out powders, wrote directions, read them aloud, carefully emphasizing the important points, and, with another kindly look at the baby, who was now awake, and whose eyes met McChesney's fearlessly, rode away.

One of the powders was to be administered as soon as the child awoke. Now water was brought, and Aunt Huldah and Sissy between them coaxed the patient little soul to swallow one of the bitter things.

The effect was magical; in twenty minutes the baby was in a gentle sleep, and every soul in the Wagon-Tire House joined in praising the doctor and rejoicing over the luck that had brought him there.

"Yes, that was the right thing to do," said Gilbert, in a tone of deep satisfaction.

Deatherage added: "Now you see, Aunt Huldy, when you git a man that understands the case, he gives relief at once. Lord! It did tough me to see the little fellow suffer."

But this season of rejoicing was brief. The baby's sleep, from peaceful, rapidly became profound, then deathly, and they cried out to Aunt Huldah:

"What is it, Aunt Huldy?"

"O Aunt Huldy! what's the matter?"

"What's come to him, Aunt Huldy?"

"O Aunt Huldy, is the baby goin' to die?"

Huldah sat with the baby in her arms, her anxious face bent over him.

"I don't know," she answered. "I don't know what's the matter—but it's something mighty serious. Sissy, honey, run and git hot water ready! A warm bath—that's what I'd do ef 'twas convulsions; an'," gently lifting one little sunken eyelid with a trembling finger, "hit's convulsions his eyes looks like. But 'tain't that, an' I don't know what to do! Oh, my God! I don't know what to do!" and the work-hardened hands brushed away big tears.

Outside, there was a sound of hoofs at a dead run. Gilbert, Deatherage and the others, looking from the door, saw Doctor McChesney coming down the street, his pony streaked with lather along the sides, the flying foam spotting the rider's dark clothing. He threw himself from the horse, motioned Deatherage, without a word, to hitch him, and fairly staggered into the Wagon-Tire House, shaking from head to foot, yet with an attempt at composure that, in a man of McChesney's weight and dignity, was touching. His face was crimson with the burning heat, his eyes bloodshot.

"Have—have you given any of those powders



yet?" he asked; and his voice came huskily, broken with gasps. "If you haven't—don't."

Then he saw the baby where it lay on Huldah's arm, saw Sissy bringing in the hot bath, looked upon the faces around him, dropped into a chair groaning and covered his face with his hands.

Huldah came close to McChesney, put her free hand on his shoulder, and said kindly and pitifully:

"What did you give him, Doctor? Don't take on so. 'Anybody livin' may make mistakes—the best and the carefullest of us. What ort we to do? What was it you give him?"

The man rose, threw off his hat, gloves, coat, cuffs, even his collar. Quickly, with hands as gentle and skilful as a woman's, he undressed the baby—and the onlookers started and cried out in terror to see the little form hang like a rag in the doctor's hold—and laid him in the bath, giving directions meanwhile for coffee to be made of quintessential strength.

"It was morphine," he groaned, too manly to dodge or prevaricate. "I had it and the quinine in two bottles exactly alike—and I made the baby's powders out of the wrong one! I found it out when I took out the case again to give some quinine to Colonel Porter. So I jumped on my horse and run him all the way back."



For three hours McChesney worked over the baby. His eyes were pitiful with remorse and tenderness.

"Such a fine boy!" he would groan. "Such a beautiful baby! Such a splendid little fellow!"

In the midst of the struggle, Mrs. Carter came in. She had that morning accompanied the doctor from their ranch to Blowout, and had just heard of the trouble at the Wagon-Tire House. Now, standing—as Mrs. Carter always stood when she came to Aunt Huldah's—with her perfumed draperies drawn about her, she murmured in an aside to Doctor McChesney—a gentleman—a person of her own class, and their family physician, to whom they were greatly attached:

"Doctor McChesney, you must not let yourself go so. I can't bear to see you so grieved. You know it's that poor soul's baby that died here at Mrs. Sarvice's a year or so ago—movers they were—just nothing! There's nobody on earth to want it or claim it—just a—"

Poor McChesney raised his bloodshot eyes to Mrs. Carter's face, and broke in upon her passionately:

"I'll tell you, Mrs. Carter, whose child he is. He's God's child, and as noble a specimen of God's work as these hands of mine ever were



laid upon. You are very kind to me. But I believe it's right for me to suffer when I think that I put my great, brutal, careless hands upon such a beautiful little life, only to—to— But if God will be good enough to let me save him yet—"

Something very like a sob checked the doctor's utterance. He stayed with them that night; and when he rode away in the morning he left the tiny patient out of danger.

The only result of the accident appeared to be that for more than a week after the occurrence the baby rubbed his dear little nose until it seemed as though he would rub it off. A hundred times through the night he would whirl upon his face, as he lay in his little crib, and scrub that small inoffensive feature up and down upon the pillow.

Aunt Huldah was afraid he would smother himself, lying quiescent, as he did, upon the unfortunate nose after he had thoroughly scrubbed it; and she, Mrs. Patterson, Sissy, and sometimes Daisy, took turns watching his sleep.

And for a month or more afterward, he sat wherever he was placed, looking mildly into vacancy, eating only as he was fed, seeming to be in a quiet, dazed condition.

As for the baby's illness, Huldah was wont to say that "the turrible rippet about the mor-



phine plumb skeered the sickness out o' the little feller". Certain it was that they never heard from it again.



CHAPTER XI

A WIDESPREAD THANKSGIVING

"Even now, perhaps, by cold and hunger led,
At proud men's doors they ask a little bread!"

"Miss Belle and Miss Genevieve, they've invited us all, down to the baby, out to the Bar 7 fer to eat Thanksgiving dinner!" Aunt Huldah announced joyously. "I guess this here hotel can jest run itself fer one day, and we'll borry a team from Roach and drive out there early Thursday morning."

"Can you drive a hawse, Miz' Sarvice?" the lady from Georgia inquired a little doubtfully. "I'm awful scared of a mean hawse."

Huldah chuckled.

"Well, I guess I can drive anything that Roach can hitch up. That's the way I feel about it—ef a man can get the leathers on a pony, w'y, I'm willin' to try drivin' of it."

It was a joyous party that left the Wagon-Tire House that Thursday morning. Narcissa had the new frock; Narcissa was of the growing age when it would be more than a new frock that



would make her look really pretty; but, as she said, "You can look at my dress, an' then you don't have to notice my face so much." The baby was almost a year old, and always good. Narcissa was learning to sew for him; she had, with Mrs. Patterson's assistance, cut and made the little white frock he wore, from a fine old white dress given her for the purpose by Miss Belle. Mrs. Patterson always was pretty; on this occasion she was more becomingly dressed than usual, and therefore, prettier than usual. Ally wore the dress whose front breadth had been properly adjusted, and her great rebellious mass of brown-gold hair was smoothly brushed into a row of curls by the same skilful fingers that had repaired her frock.

Daisy, a slim, dainty little lady, with her crown of short fair rings of hair, and big blue eyes, beginning to emerge from the cloud that had lowered over her so long, looked fragile and exquisite in one of the frocks from the trunk marked "Eleanor Sargent."

Altogether, Aunt Huldah was justified in beaming with satisfaction upon the group.

"Well, ef anybody in Texas has got a purtier wagon-load of young ones than this, w'y, I don't know it!" she said; and her satisfaction seemed



to be equally divided between their good appearance and the fact that there was a wagon-load of them.

Roach Porterman was out of town, so Huldah had been obliged to get her turnout from a Mexican who sometimes hired conveyances to the drummers who came through Blowout. The horses were an ill-sorted pair, mustangs both of them. Old Paint was a dark bay, with great patches of white upon him, and a bald face. Flyer was, as Huldah said, "nigh about a foot taller than t'other pony." He was well built, a rapid traveler, but a nervous, uncomfortable beast, ready to run at a moment's notice, and getting over the ground in a constant twitter of apprehension.

"These is the best horse I can do, to-day," old Juan explained. "I don't think he's very good horse for ladies, but, Aunt Huldy, you's a pretty good gentleman, when it comes to horse."

"That's so!" Huldah laughed. "Oh, we'll get along all right. I can manage 'em. You let go their heads, Juan."

The children were all in, with Sissy and Mrs. Patterson in charge of them; Aunt Huldah was on the driver's seat, Daisy beside her; Juan let go of the horses' heads. They made one or two

aimless plunges, old Paint apparently trying to pull in one direction while Flyer lunged in the other.

"Miz' Sarvice, you let me right out of this here!" the lady from Georgia protested. "I'm not going to ride behind these vicious beasts. You'll get us all killed, again, with your foolishness—that's what you'll do!"

"I hain't got you killed oncet yet, have I?" Huldah inquired blithely. "No, no, Miz' Patterson, you set right still. I can't get these here ponies stopped to let you out—not easy, I couldn't. But they'll be all right by the time they've had a little run."

Perhaps they were all right, so far as Huldah's opinion went; but Mrs. Patterson continued to shudder and utter half-suppressed shrieks all the way to the Bar 7. Under the skilled hands of their driver, the ponies finally settled down to a steady lope, not an uncommon harness gait in the western cattle country.

The children enjoyed the drive immensely.

"When I grow up," Gess confided to Tell, "I'm goin' to be jest like 'Aunt Huldy—'bout drivin', I mean. I'm jest goin' t' set up an' square my elbows an' let 'em go scallyhootin', like she does."

The Bar 7 reached, the house was found shut up and locked.



"Well!" fretted Mrs. Patterson. "This is a pretty way to treat people. when you've invited them to dinner."

"I expect they've been called away suddent," Huldah said. "That there sister of Miz' Allen's over to Emerald, w'y, she's been porely, and I doubt not she's been took worse. Likely they've sent us a letter, and we hain't never got it."

Just then a small Mexican boy on a burro, who had missed them at Blowout, and followed on to the Bar 7, rode into the yard, to justify Huldah's wisdom by giving her a little note from the Allens, which explained exactly the situation she had guessed at, and hoped the pleasure of this day was only postponed until their return.

It was near noon; the children were getting hungry and tired.

"Where do you live, little boy?" Mrs. Patterson asked the child.

"I live over to Mr. Deatherage's," the boy explained. "About three miles down that way," and he pointed.

"I guess we'll have to go over to Lone Deatherage's ranch," said Huldah, finally, turning a strange look upon Mrs. Patterson. "We couldn't get a thing for the children to eat here; and we've got to have something before they start back."

"I don't see why not," Mrs. Patterson replied.



"If he's sech a friend of yours, Miz' Sarvice, there's no reason why you shouldn't go there; and though I do despise a man of his sort, why, I don't want to stand in the way."

So the team was turned, and following the lad on the burro they were soon at the little adobe ranch-house which Lone Deatherage called home.

Everything looked desolate and inhospitable; there was no welcoming face at any door or window; and the Wagon-Tire party began to feel very much chilled and depressed. There was a subdued sniffling among the children, and Romey even howled in an undertone. The baby, for whom a bottle of milk had been brought along, was the only really cheerful member.

Huldah sat in the wagon and held the team, while Mrs. Patterson climbed down and reconnoitered. She came back with the statement that there wasn't a soul about the place, and every door was locked.

"Well, then, I'm jest a-goin' to break in one o' them there doors," announced Aunt Huldah, resolutely. "These here chil'en has got to have somethin' to eat, and Lone wouldn't grudge a broken door-latch, ef he knowed about it." She gave the lines over to the boy, and taking all the children down from the covered "hack", went to the house.



She began a vigorous hammering upon the kitchen door; at last it was opened by a very scared-looking young woman with a baby in her arms. Huldah asked in astonishment:

"Why in creation didn't you open that there door before this time?"

"They ain't nobody but maw an' me an' the baby here," the girl answered, as she held the door and seemed to wish to shut them out. "Maw, she's got one o' her spells, an' 'tain't safe fer strangers to be about. She's apt to hurt some o' them there chil'en, ef you bring 'em in here."

"Crazy?" inquired Huldah, with interest. "I'm a master hand with crazy folks. I ain't a bit scared of 'em—pore souls. But I reckon you an' Daisy'd better keep the chil'en close around you, Miz' Patterson."

The caution was not needed; Mrs. Patterson had fled toward the wagon, and most of the youngsters after her.

Huldah pushed open the kitchen door.

"I'm comin' in," she said. "I've jest got to have somethin' fer my chil'en to eat—let alone Miz' Patterson an' Daisy. Reckon you've got some bread and coffee, hain't you?"

Once inside, she found the old woman sitting beside the stove, muttering. There was a smell of liquor in the air, which might have accounted



in part for her attack. The older woman was an Indian half-breed, and the younger, her daughter; these were the best housekeepers Lone Deatherage had been able to find.

"Pore feller!" Huldah murmured. "I 'most wish I could come out an' keep house fer him."

Some bread was found, and even some butter. The young woman set a pot of coffee to boil, and things began to look more cheerful, when the old squaw was discovered sharpening an immense butcher-knife upon the stovepipe, with mutterings and glarings which evidently terrified her daughter, and threats in her own tongue against the intruders.

"Well, now, that's mighty kind," Huldah said, smiling and reaching a confident hand for the knife. "You're jest gittin' a knife ready fer me to cut this here bread and butter fer the chil'en, now ain't you?"

The old woman, who was plainly used to being a terror to all comers, surrendered the knife and subsided. The bread was cut and spread, the coffee put in a small bucket, and a string of tin cups was tied to its bail.

"I'm a-goin' to take this stuff in the dinin'-room," Huldah announced. "The wind, it's blowin' most too hard fer the chil'en to enjoy eatin' out in that wagon."



She put this plan into execution. They all sat in a cluster at one end of the long table, and partook of their very meager fare with such appetite as made it delicious, and hope revived.

When the meal was finished, Huldah went outside to see if the boy could feed their horses before they drove back to Blowout. Even she was a bit dashed when she found that he had unharnessed the vicious old Paint and the convulsive Flyer, turned them into the horse-lot along with Lone's ponies, and then seemingly vanished into space, since he was nowhere to be found.

She came back to the house, and led her brood into the bunk room.

"Now then, Narcissy, you an' Daisy stay here with the chil'en," she directed. "Fasten the door after us, when we go out. I don't p'intedly think that pore ol' soul out there would do a thing to anybody; but you fasten the door, an' you'll feel more safer.

"Me an' Miz' Patterson 'll go an' harness up, an' we'll git back to Blowout as quick as we can. Hit 'll be late this evenin'—but the moon's full, ye know—that's why Miss Genevieve picked on to-day—an' we'll have a perfectly lovely drive home in the moonlight, jest like we was a-goin' to if nothin' hadn't happened. Things has turned out a little diff'rent from what we planned it;

but we're a-havin' a mighty good time, all the same."

The two women went out to the horse-lot where Flyer and old Paint were forgathering with such of the L Bar D ponies as were up, and succeeded, after chasing and hallooing (which caused Mrs. Patterson to scold a good deal, and Huldah to laugh about an equal amount), in getting them brought up to the corral gate.

When at last they had got them there, they discovered that the gate was shut, and the old woman, whom they had left at the house, and almost forgotten in the excitement of the chase, stood before it and "shooed" the horses away, screeching, laughing, and waving her arms like some new patent mechanical scarecrow.

Mrs. Patterson shrank from the old squaw's wicked look. But Huldah went up to her, and laying hold of her with a laugh, exclaimed:

"Well, you are a great one for a joke! You got us that time; but you ain't a-goin' to git us this time," and she pulled her away as though they had been two children playing a game.

Again senseless animosity yielded to the sunshine of good-humor. Muttering, the old woman moved aside, almost shamefaced. Once more they drove the horses up to the gate; and this time succeeded in getting their own team sep-



arated from the rest and safely driven into the inclosure.

"Come on!" cried Mrs. Patterson, excitedly; "come on, Aunt Huldy! Let's harness up and get home."

So, for a quarter of an hour, the two women ran and waved their arms and shouted, the one alternating between tears and imprecations, the other going off into irresistible peals of laughter.

"Well, we hain't a-gettin' any forrader, at this rate," concluded Huldah, mopping her glowing face, "though I don't remember when I ever had a better time in all my life."

"Can't you throw a las-*soo*?" inquired the other, coming up weary and exasperated.

"Well, no, I don't sca'cely reckon I could," returned her friend, smiling.

"Well, couldn't you set up on the fence there, and hold out this here noose?"

"Yes—oh, yes, I could do that."

"Well," said the lady from Georgia, "ef you'll do that, I'll chase 'em round the corral, an' when they run their heads through the noose—w'y, we'll have 'em, won't we?"

"Umm, well, I dunno," debated Huldah, "whether I'd have him, er he'd have me, under them there circumstances. I'm mighty feared a



hoss wouldn't run his head through a noose hilt out fer him thataway—less'n he was stone-blind; an' I'm afeared that ef he did so, time I give him a yank with the rope, he'd jerk me off'n that fence, an' plumb into the middle o' next week."

"Can't you pay the rope out sorter gradual?" demanded the Georgia lady, severely.

"Dunno whether Flyer er old Paint either 'd take it in gradual payments," still debated Huldah; and the Georgia lady's penetrating eye discovered a trembling of the older woman's soft bulk, which suggested unseemly laughter, ill suppressed. But their need was urgent. No better plan was offered. The older woman yielded to her friend's insistence.

She described herself afterward, for the delight of her boarders and friends in general, "a-settin' peerched plumb on the top o' that stockade, half skeered an' half tickled—a old fat lady like me—a-holdin' out a danglin' noose at arm's len'th, waitin' fer them snortin', stravagin' hosses to come up an' kindly run their heads through it! Hit was like 'Dilly, Dilly, come up an' be killed.' Never felt so like a clown in a circus in my life. Thar' I sot an' sot an' sot, a-holdin' my noose; an' thar' Miz' Patterson run an' run an' run! 'An' ever' time them skites o' hosses would come to whar' I was, they'd go twenty feet wide



o' the noose! An' then Miz' Patterson would step out in front o' me an' look up—fa'rly shakin' her fist at me—yes you did, Miz' Patterson; you know you did!—an' ast me why I didn't ketch 'em. An' spite o' all that, I was jest a-dyin' a-laughin'; an' I'd ast her back why didn't she chase 'em right up through it!"

Finally the lady from Georgia stopped in despair. Looking around, she espied a chicken-house.

"Can't we drive them into that, Mrs. Sarvice?" she inquired. "Come down quick, an' let's try."

Huldah descended from her inglorious throne, and the two finally succeeded, by making a sudden, frantic dive at old Paint, who was just approaching the little shed, in thrusting him into it.

They slammed shut the flapping door. The lady from Georgia was just opening her lips with a triumphant air, when something went off like a cannon. The door burst from its hinges and knocked both women flat on the ground. The sides of the house flew out in every direction, plank by plank, with such a sound as a brisk musketry fire might make; and with a final kick, in which he almost stood on his nose, Paint tossed the flimsy roof skyward, and bounced off.

Huldah crawled from under the lid that Paint had placed upon them, and turning dragged out

the lady from Georgia. The former was chuckling secretly; the latter eying her reproachfully. Without a word, they returned to the house.

They found the little garrison in the bunk room looking hopefully for them. It was rather cast down when informed that nothing had been done.

"I move that we start walkin' up the Blowout trail; we're almost sure to meet some one," said 'Aunt Huldah, cheerily. Daisy and Sissy both brightened, and the children rose promptly.

"Yes," agreed Mrs. Patterson; "and if we don't, I'd ruther set out in the road, flat on the ground all night, than stay under the roof with that awful old woman."

They gathered their belongings, and Daisy, who was the first to the door, turned with an exclamation of distress.

"It's locked!" she cried.

They ran to the one window—a back one. Before they reached it the old woman, with a screech of laughter, clapped to the heavy shutter; and while they stood hesitating they could hear her bring up a clothes-pole to prop it. Then she pounded on the planks, and shouted, "I got ye—I got ye now!"

"Well, I'll be whipped!" declared 'Aunt Huldah. "She's a little sorter quare, ain't she? Ef I could git her—could git a-holt o' her—I could



make it up with her all right; we wouldn't have a speck o' trouble. I reckon we've jest got to holler, as 'tis."

So they shouted, Huldah heartily, the lady from Georgia in a protesting tone, the children making a shrill accompaniment, while Daisy clung timidly to Aunt Huldah's arm.

But there was no answer, either then or later, though they shouted again and again.

"There's some matches on the mantel," announced Gess.

"S'pose we burn the house—jest burn our way out—" supplemented Tell.

They all laughed a bit at this. Then Aunt Huldah, putting Daisy in a chair, giving the baby to Sissy, and commanding the others to make themselves comfortable as might be, began to reconnoiter systematically.

While she was still at this, they suddenly heard horses' hoofs, and then a loud halloo and the laughter of men.

"What's up here, Josepha?" asked a man's voice, which Huldah recognized as Kid Barringer's. Other voices joined in, and there was a good deal of laughing and joking back and forth between the men and the old squaw, who was begging for whisky.

"Whisky, eh?" echoed Kid's voice, "I reckon



you've had more than enough of that, an' I'll bet you've been up to some mischief, right now."

This rebuke recalled the prisoners to their situation, and they shouted for help in a loud chorus; but the walls were thick; the men were laughing and chaffing, their horses moving about, and the old squaw shouting and singing; and altogether there was too much noise for the cry for help to be heard.

Most alarming of all, it began to appear that the visitors, finding Lone not at home, were about to ride on.

At this discovery, the lady from Georgia pounded desperately on the wall, while Huldah shouted:

"Hey, Kid! Kid Barringer! Wait!"

And Sissy and all the tribe of children joined in, "We're in here—and can't git out. Halloo-oo-oo! Oh, oh, oh! Ow! Wow, wow-ow!"

"Oh, Miz' Sarvice!" said the lady from Georgia, pitifully, turning a pale face to her friend. "Can't you think of something? They're a-goin' —*they're a-goin'!*"

"Yes, I kin," responded Aunt Huldah, firmly. "Gess, you come here an' shin up this chimbly—hit's plenty big—come on, honey; you'd climb it any time fer fun."



"You bet I would! An' I'll climb it now, mighty quick," responded Gess, valiantly.

The chimney was big and wide, built of stone, and with a capacious fireplace. Little Gess ducked his dark head and clambered up the sooty flue. The prisoners, grouped around the fireplace, silent and anxious, heard him scrambling and climbing.

"Oh, Gess, air you stuck up thar'?" whispered Tell, peering upward with his little pale face.

"Smoke 'em out—smoke 'em out! Light a fire an' smoke 'em out!" came down in muffled tones.

"What? what?" asked two or three voices at once.

"Chimbly swallers. The chimbly's full of 'em, an' th' ol' birds is a-fightin' me. Oh, ow, wow! Smoke 'em out!"

"Smoke 'em out!" gasped Aunt Huldah, between laughter and anxiety. "W'y, whar'd you be, Gess? You—"

At this instant, two full-grown swifts in eager flight struck Aunt Huldah right in the inquiring countenance which she had turned up to watch little Gess's movements, and sent her rolling back into the middle of the room, covered with soot and flying ashes.

Wild terror prevailed in the little group whose



head was thus laid low among them. But Huldah got to her feet, gasping with laughter, and reassured her followers.

Meanwhile, Gess had got the better of the fight; and just as the visitors outside were preparing to ride away, their attention was attracted by a commotion in one of the ranch-house chimneys, from the top of which, as they looked, a flight of angry birds burst, twittering.

"Great Scott! What in all Texas is that?" cried Lengthy Malone, and he pointed where a sooty head appeared above the chimney ledge.

Upon the word, this head popped suddenly up, Gess having found firm footing at the instant on a slight projection. Two slim little arms, which scattered soot like a black caricature of snow, were waved wildly, and the apparition squeaked in the shrill falsetto of childish excitement,

"Hi, boys! Ow, Lengthy! Hi, Kid! Don't go away—we're shut up in here!"

For an instant the riders were dumb with astonishment. Then there burst forth a shout of laughter, Lengthy's voice inquiring above the others:

"Shut up in thar', in that thar' chimbly? An' who the everlastin' mischief is 'we'? Air you some kind o' black monkey from Africker—er

one o' Aunt Huldy Sarvice's Gess-an'-Tell twins?"

"An' sence when did you take to livin' in chimblies?" put in Kid Barringer.

Gess, feeling his footing insecure, made haste to advertise their woes in one swift sentence.

"Aunt-Huldy-'n-Sissy-'n-Miss - Daisy-'n-Miz'-Patterson-'n-all-the-chil'en's-down-in-the-room—locked-up—an'-can't-git-out-ner—"

His slippery footing gave way; he collapsed and vanished down the chimney, sending up a cloud of soot, and another detachment of twittering birds.

The boys looked at one another in amazement; then Kid Barringer hit on the explanation.

"It's old Josepha, at her tricks. She's got Aunt Huldy an' them kids locked up."

While the other boys were convulsed with laughter, Lon Prendergast declaring between gasps that "Aunt Huldy Sarvice had got this here cattle country so thick with orphants that they jest popped their heads up out'n a neighbor's chimbly as you rode past, an' hollered to ye fer help," Lengthy and Kid Barringer jumped from their horses and ran to the house, calling to the others to hold the old squaw, as they believed she had been into mischief.



But Josepha had fled at the first sight of the chimney climber; and, though they searched, they did not find her.

Lengthy unlocked the door and entered, with Kid Barringer, Lon Prendergast, Lefty Phillips and Little Crawford.

Huldah said afterward that it was a regular love-feast. The boys had an X Q K mess wagon with them, from which a good meal was promptly evolved, and eaten amid the greatest hilarity, Kid Barringer and Lengthy reciting, turn and turn about, the tale of the distressful sweep, Lon Prendergast shaking his head at Huldah and repeating again and again that she "had made orphants so numerous in this here west Texas cattle country that you couldn't ride up to a neighbor's ranch 'thout one poppin' its head out'n a chimbly and hollerin' to ye to come and rescue it."

When the happy meal was over, two of the boys went out and harnessed up Flyer and old Paint, and these hardened sinners went home "as meek as Moses," Huldah said, though at a good clipping pace, the boys riding in a jolly cavalcade before and behind and along the sides of this ambulatory orphan-asylum.



CHAPTER XII

A RAINY SUNDAY

"For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

The rain was coming down in sheets—always a welcome sight in west Texas—but it was Sunday morning, nearly time for Sunday-school.

"There's no manner of use going over there. A body would ruin every rag they had on, and they won't be a soul there," Mrs. Patterson declared.

"Oh, law, yes; there'll be somebody there if we all go," Huldah laughed. "Look's like it's a pore compliment to our Sunday-school jest to go when the day is fine, an' you'd be a-wishin' fer some place to go anyhow. Looks to me like we ought to get a extry joy out of goin' on a day like this, when it takes some effort to get thar'."

Mrs. Patterson had an umbrella. Aunt Huldah herself proclaimed that she did not care about umbrellas—a shawl over her head was as good as she'd ask. The stiffly-starched lawn frocks, which would have been put on the little girls,

were laid by, and a couple of dark calicoes substituted. The skirts of these were raised over their heads at the back, and pinned beneath their chins.

Every child was barefoot and squealing with delight at the thought of splashing through the puddles. As for Daisy's umbrella,—dark blue silk with a silver handle,—Aunt Huldah protested vainly, while it was being resolutely carried over her head by its young owner, that it was a sin and a shame to wet such a beautiful parasol.

Troy Gilbert, lounging in the doorway of the Roundup, saw the little procession setting devotedly forth, and joined it. There is a powerful attraction in the appearance of people who are braving something—making some effort—which brings others to walk beside them. It would be the first time Troy had ever attended Sunday-school, and Huldah was proportionately delighted.

They started out in a lull; but when they had traversed half the distance, the rain began to come down with such a will that it seemed as though there were a special design to test their resolution.

"I offered to study up the lesson with the children—we've all got lesson leaves," the lady from Georgia announced. "I don't see why that

wouldn't be just as good as traipsin' over here through the mud and rain, and ruinin' every stitch you've got on your back."

"I jest love to go through the rain, sometimes," Huldah observed, with undiminished good-humor. "I think it's more fun than a little."

"So do we!" cried Gess and Tell and Ally, running ahead and seeking every bit of water to wade in.

Romey clung timidly to Aunt Huldah's hand.

"It makes my foots cold," he whimpered.

"Aunt Huldy will rub his foots fer him, on this here flour-sack, when we git to the Sunday school," his protectress assured him.

A horseman came splashing down the street through the rain. Huldah thought she recognized Lone Deatherage, and glanced quickly at Mrs. Patterson.

That lady had her umbrella held low against the rain, and was not looking. Yet the man on horseback had turned up the collar of his slicker so that, had it not been for the pony he was riding, Huldah would not have been sure of his identity.

He bowed to the Wagon-Tire company without raising his hat.

"Well!" ejaculated Huldah. "That was Lone Deatherage. I bet he's goin' to the Wagon-Tire House. I've half a mind to go back." She paused



and turned amid an outburst of objections from her little party.

So far, Mrs. Patterson had never looked on Lone Deatherage's face; yet she had joined the majority that condemned Huldah for holding to the poor fellow.

"Come on, Mrs. Sarvice—you'll be soaked if you stand here in the rain," she fretted. "That man's gone a-past the hotel, anyhow."

"W'y, so he has," Huldah agreed wonderingly. "I wish't I'd stopped him. I've got a feelin' that he wants somethin'." Troy looked impatient. He was in a well-nigh angelic mood for the most part, these days; but Lone Deatherage—and Aunt Huldah's attitude toward the man—constituted a sore subject with him.

"Are you coming on?" he asked finally.

"Yes," answered Huldah. "Well—well!" and she went forward to Sunday-school.

But even after the building was reached, and she was rubbing the little wet legs and feet with her thoughtfully provided flour-sack, she muttered doubtfully to herself: "I wish't I'd 'a' gone back a piece an' talked to him. I feel sort of oneasy about Lone."

Matters were unexpectedly cheerful at the little Sunday-school; the small Portermans, seeing Aunt Huldah's party pass, had demanded to be



allowed to go also; young Mr. Hardaway was already there.

There were fifteen pupils in Mrs. Patterson's little day school. Two of these were young men who might have been deemed past the age for such an academy; but, lured either by the attractions of the teacher or her teaching, they had enrolled themselves.

These two young fellows were soon earnest rivals for the favor of the schoolmistress, whom every one regarded as a widow, since Troy Gilbert had so far failed to find any trace of her husband; and Mrs. Patterson's attitude in this matter commended her to Huldah more than anything she had yet done. She ignored the boyish rivalry in so womanly a fashion, and set so earnestly and kindly about being a good and useful friend to her very youthful suitors, that the mistress of the Wagon-Tire House said to herself: "I allus knowed she was a good woman, an' a fine woman. A little trouble and experience is bringin' her right out."

Martin Burke, the taller and elder of Mrs. Patterson's pupil admirers, never failed to go where he thought there was a possibility of meeting her. This was, perhaps, not entirely for the delight he felt in her society, but partly that he might be able to boast of it to his rival, George



Pardee, who lived on a ranch a short distance out, and was naturally deprived of many of these opportunities. So this rainy Sunday found him early at Sunday-school, and eagerly looking for the Wagon-Tire party.

"Ye see how 'tis," Huldah remarked beamingly, "it's jest like a boy throwin' a stone into a puddle. That makes a little ring in the middle; an' that there ring makes a big ring; an' that there big ring makes a bigger ring; an' that there bigger ring hits another an' sends it out till the last ring hits the bank. You can't never do anything in this world but what it stirs up somebody else."

Mrs. Patterson was inspecting her skirt edge.

"Well, fer the land's sake! I thought I was holding that skirt up good," she mourned. "Why on earth didn't you tell me it was dragging, Miz' Sarvice?"

Huldah's theory of the rings struck the lady from Georgia at an inopportune moment.

"Well, according to that, a bad thing you would do would throw a bad ring. Somehow, I don't see it's anything to feel good about," she said rather snappishly.

"That's a sure fact!" Huldah agreed. "You can't do a mean thing, or be in a mean business,



an' jest hurt yourself alone. It's share an' share alike in this world. It's like God's creatures was a stream o' water, an' each person was a wave on that there stream; and the wave is the stream, and the stream is the wave. They rise an' fall together. The wave can't be clean and the stream be dirty; an' there ain't no use of the wave tryin' to hold itself separate from the stream."

She stole a look at Troy Gilbert's flushed, annoyed face.

"I don't want to out-and-out disgust him with Sunday-school the first time he ever come to it; but I do want him to hear the truth, one day in seven," she said to herself.

Daisy was already at the organ, playing; and the children were seated in an orderly little group, singing away lustily. There is a big relish about any meeting to which one has struggled through unfavorable weather. Something of this feeling came to the little Sunday-school at Blow-out, with the wind trying at the door-latch and rattling the casement, while the rain thundered upon the shingles.

There were not enough children or teachers present to divide the Sunday-school into different classes, so they all sat in one big class. And the lesson went through with such joyous speed



that they found themselves with a half-hour to spare, and the rain still coming down so steadily that no one wanted to start home.

"You teach us, Aunt Huldah," Daisy said gently. "We'll all sit in a circle, and you talk to us. We've had our lesson now, and we love to hear you talk better than anything."

"Let's each one tell what's our biggest trouble in the world, and see if Aunt Huldah can help us," some one suggested.

"Oh, lawsy, no!" Huldah remonstrated. "Don't let's set around on a nice rainy day like this an' talk about troubles; it's everybody's duty to be as happy as they can. Let's try each one to tell what his greatest joy is."

But the first idea had taken root. It is characteristic of human nature to enjoy more talking about one's troubles than about one's blessings.

The first among those interrogated returned joking answers; they were the elders of the party, and not likely to be so frank about that which distressed them. But when the question, "Well, what's your main trouble?" came to Sissy, she answered promptly, though in a low tone:

"Being so ugly."

"Now then, Sissy," Aunt Huldah objected, "I don't like to hear you call yourself ugly, no more than I would like to hear you throw off on some-

body else's looks. You've got to be friends with yourself before you can do any good."

"W'y, Aunt Huldy," protested the child, surprised into sudden frankness of speech, "you don't want me to be vain, do you? and me so ugly."

"Now, don't say that again," returned Huldah, cheerily. "Don't you get in the habit of it. God never made any good person really ugly. You've got a mighty fair skin, when the freckles is off it, and as pretty a shaped foot as I ever seen. Tell you, chil'en, they's more ways than one o' bein' vain. Some folks talks all the time about bein' ugly—jest 'cause they think too much about good looks; an' I call that one way o' bein' vain."

Mart Burke admitted blushingly that his trouble in life was wanting things he couldn't get.

"I don't believe it," declared Aunt Huldah, briskly. "You jest think so; and that's because you're young and haven't had much experience. I tell you, chil'en, the things that God intends fer us are put where we kin git 'em—by tryin'. The thing we ort not to have is the thing we never *kin* have. It's a wonder to me to see folks strive as they do after things any one can see was never intended fer 'em. They don't know, pore souls, that if they could by any means git a-holt of the thing they think they want, jest gittin' it thataway

wouldn't make it really their'n. Why, chil'en, when you once make up your mind that you don't want nothin' except what really b'longs to you, everything gits easy, an' you may know your own by its jest comin' to you, like as if it was sent—an' *'tis* sent."

"According to that," began Troy, rather resentfully, "we'd all give up trying."

"'Deed we wouldn't!" laughed Huldah. "We wouldn't give up workin'—God blesses the worker, whether he works fine or not. But I tell you what we would give up; we'd give up worryin'. They's two things that they's no use a-worryin' about—jest two. One of 'em is the thing that a body can't help. T'other is the thing that a body kin help."

There was a brief silence, and then a little burst of laughter, and young Mr. Hardaway said: "Well, that covers the ground, Mrs. Sarvice. You can always help a thing—or you can't."

"It covers the ground," Huldah replied, smiling. "By which a body might mean that it covers the whole earth. Nobody's so big a fool that he'd hold you ought to worry over a thing you couldn't help—that's so, ain't it? Well, that settles half the things to worry about. Shorely a wise man would say that ruther than worry over a thing you could help, you should be up an'



a-helpin' it—an' that settles t'other half. They ain't no room fer worry in this here beautiful world 'at God's made fer us."

"That's the difference between what ought to be and what is," young Mr. Hardaway commented.

"Should you say so? In God's world?"

The younger children had gathered themselves in a quiet little group at the windows, where they watched the diminishing rain. The elders drew closer together.

"I wish I could feel as you do about everything that comes, Miz' Sarvice," the lady from Georgia said. "I reckon I've made a good many mistakes—I know I have—and when I look ahead, well, the way seems pretty hard."

"I hain't got much use fer lookin' ahead," Huldah answered gently. "It's one of the big blessin's that we don't have to live but one day at a time. One day's jest as good as another; it's what you do in the day 'at counts. We've got into the way o' lookin' back into the past an' sayin', 'Oh, them was good times!' or lookin' on to what's ahead and sayin', 'Oh, them will be fine times!'—or, maybe, if we're turned the other way, sayin', 'Them will be awful times!' Now, to-day's been a fine day. We've had a beautiful rain. It's done the grass a lot o' good. We've enjoyed comin'



through it to Sunday-school, an' we've had jest the nicest Sunday-school that ever was. Why should we set to work an' make up our minds that there won't be another day jest as good as this?—an' I don't want no better."

"I see you don't believe in the pleasure of anticipation, Mrs. Sarvice," young Mr. Hardaway said. "You think to-day is just as good as to-morrow."

"They ain't any sech thing as to-morrow in this world. Did you ever reason that out? You can't live to-morrow, while 'tis to-morrow. When you're livin' it, it 'll be to-day."

Daisy was beginning to think. She was at last making use of longer sentences, like an older person. At first she had expressed herself in the brief, simple utterances of a child.

"I see just what you mean, Aunt Huldah," she agreed gently. "You never could have accomplished what you have here, you never could have taken care of your household of children, if you'd dared to look ahead, and dread the future. My mother used to say that anybody could bear the troubles of a day, *in* that day, and that we musn't carry yesterday's troubles into to-day, nor reach ahead and pull to-morrow's troubles into to-day, or it would be like an overloaded boat and would sink with us."



"That's a fine way of puttin' it," Huldah agreed. "I never should have thought o' that, 'cause I've never been about boats and water much; but I used to have a thought, when I was a girl, back at home in the mountains, that meant a good deal to me. Our paths and roads all wound around through the bushes thar'; and I used to think to myself that they was jest like a body's life. You keep walkin' along; sometimes you say to yourself that you enjoy it, and sometimes you let yourself think you're pretty tired; sometimes it's hot fer travelin', and sometimes it's jest pleasant. You can't see ahead, an' the best thing fer you is to enjoy the travelin'; but ef you're foolish you'll keep sayin' to yourself: 'I believe I'll like it better right around this here turn; ef I keep walkin' right brisk I'll soon git to the spot where it's awful fine.' We don't never set down an' look at the path we 're 'bleeged to travel; but we keep a-thinkin' we'll like it better further along, er we keep a-dreadin' that we won't like it so well. After all, jest the path itself —an' the travelin'—is the thing; an' ef you l'arn to love that, to take each step the very best you know how, to think how sightly the little bushes and the grass by the wayside is, never to fergit that the blue sky is over your head; w'y, you've walked your path the way God meant you to."



The rain was over; the lady from Georgia rose with a little sigh.

"We can't all be good like you are, Miz' Sarvice," she concluded.

"Good like me!" exclaimed Huldah, laughing. "Well, I should hope not! The less a feller knows about how good he is, the better I'm apt to like him."

The sandy, thirsty plains-soil had drunk all the rain; it was dry underfoot as well as sunshiny overhead when Sunday-school broke up. For that reason Mrs. Patterson forgot her rubbers. Half-way home to the Wagon-Tire House, she remembered them.

"Never mind," said Mart Burke, who was walking with the crowd, in the fond delusion that he was walking home with Mrs. Patterson; "never mind, I'll bring them over this evening."

After supper he arrived with a package, and spent a delightful evening at the Wagon-Tire House; but when methodical Mrs. Patterson unwrapped her overshoes to put them away, she found only one.

"If that ain't jest like a careless boy!" she fumed. "I do hope he didn't lose the other one on the way."

He had not lost the other one. He was absent from school Monday; but Monday evening saw

him at the Wagon-Tire House again with the other rubber.

"Lawsy me, Mart! you made yourself a lot of extra trouble missin' that overshoe Sunday evenin'," Mrs. Patterson observed, as she thanked him.

"No, I didn't," he returned with a flaming countenance, but sticking bravely to his colors. "I brung 'em one at a time so's't they'd last longer; an' I jest wish't you was a centipede—that's all."

Mart had his second visit, of which he could boast to his rival; but Mrs. Patterson was careful to avoid anything of the sort in the future.



CHAPTER XIII

WHEN THE SHOW CAME TO TOWN

"When the circus come to town,
Mighty me! Mighty me!
Jest one wink from that ol' clown,
When he's struttin' up an' down
To the music Bim—bam—bee!
Oh sich sights, sich sights to see,
When the circus come to town!"

Blowout was on a boom.

The railroad from above was coming through, and Blowout was to be a city with that mysterious and rather disconcerting abruptness with which tiny western villages do become cities in these circumstances.

It had been hoped that the railroad would be through by the Fourth of July, when the less important celebration of the nation's birthday might be combined with the proper marking of that event. But, though tales came down to Blowout of how the contractors were working night and day shifts, and shipping men from the East in order to have the road through in time, though the Wagon-Tire House had entertained many



squads of engineers and even occasional parties of the contractors' men, the railroad was not through on the Fourth.

Something much more important was arranged by Providence, however—at least more important in the eyes of the children of the Wagon-Tire House. Frosty La Rue's grand aggregation of talent was to be in Blowout for a week, and the human performers were stopping at Huldah Sarvice's hotel.

If one can go far enough back to remember the awe and mystery surrounding a circus, and then imagine a circus coming bodily to lodge in one's own dwelling, to eat with the knives and forks at one's table—a circus which could swallow fire and swords, and things of that sort, just eating off plates in the ordinary manner, with Sissy waiting on the table behind its chairs—if one can get back to this happy time, it will be possible to comprehend some of the rapture Gess and Tell experienced while Frosty La Rue's show abode at the Wagon-Tire House.

They lorded it over every other child in Blowout, shining with reflected splendor. They were the most sought after of any of the boys in school, for Romey was too young to afford information. La Rue himself looked upon them and said that they were "likely little fellers," and that he

"wouldn't mind having them to train." Think of that! To train!

Aunt Huldah, with bat-like blindness to their best advantages, had stated to Mr. La Rue that their father was in—well—in Kansas, and had only left them with her, as it were, "on demand."

For one dreadful moment the twins envied Aunt Huldah's real orphans. Then realizing that Aunt Huldah would no more give up Sissy or 'Ally than she would give up them, they reflected that the ambition of boys is apt, in this cold unsympathetic world, to be thwarted by their elders, and settled down to the more active and thorough enjoyment of what they might have.

The company consisted of old La Rue; his second wife, who figured upon the bill as Signorina Ippolita di Castelli, an ex-circus rider of very mature years; Frosty's factotum, a Mexican by the name of José Romero; little Roy, the Aërial Wonder, son of Frosty and the Signorina; and last and most important of all, Minnie La Rue.

The show was well-known in the Texas cattle country, and well-loved. Frosty's daughter—she was only sixteen when he was last at Blowout, more than a year ago—was a pretty little thing, and her father had trained her to be a graceful tight-rope performer. He himself did some shoot-

ing from horseback, which most of the cowboys who applauded it could have beaten.

Frosty La Rue drank hard, and he was very surly when he was drinking. Even Aunt Huldah's boundless charity found it difficult to speak well of his treatment of Minnie. The Signorina could take care of herself—and of the Aërial Wonder as well. But the heft of her father's temper, and sometimes the weight of his hand also, fell on the young girl when things went amiss.

And things had gone amiss, more particularly in regard to her, during the last six months. Up to that time she had looked like a child, small for her age, silent, with big wistful eyes, deft, clever fingers, and a voice and manner that charmed every audience—in short, the most valuable piece of property in La Rue's outfit.

The girl had bloomed into sudden and lovely girlhood when Kid Barringer saw her at Abilene, in April, patiently performing the tricks that had been taught her, obediently risking her young life that there might be plenty of money for her father to lose at the monte table, and that they might all be clothed and fed.

Kid had known the La Rue family and the girl for years, and when he promptly lost his heart



to this surprising development of its daughter, he went frankly to the head of the clan and asked for her like a man.

There was no fault to find with Kid Barringer. He was good-looking, more intelligent than most of his mates, an honest, industrious and kind-hearted fellow, of whom his employers spoke well. If the girl cared for him—and Kid asserted that he had asked her and found out that she did care—she could not hope to do better.

But, of course, for La Rue to give up this most valuable chattel was out of the question. What he did, therefore, was to fly into a rage, refuse the Kid's offer in language which would have precipitated a brawl had the young man been less earnest in his wooing, and consign Minnie to the watchful vigilance of the ex-circus rider, her stepmother.

And the cowboy had been vainly following the show during the whole two months that had passed since this episode, anxiously watching his poor little hard-worked sweetheart, hoping to get a word from her, meaning in any case to reassure her, and show her that he had not given up.

Matters were in this state when the "aggregation" settled down at the Wagon-Tire House for the week during which the Fourth of July was to

occur. For this occasion La Rue promised a display of fireworks "superior to anything ever shown in west Texas".

The fame of this spectacle had preceded the show. It had been given in Emerald the year before, and all the cowboys who had seen it there brought back word that it was "the finest ever". The particular feature was in the closing act which La Rue had christened "Columbia Enlightening the World".

For this performance a wire was stretched across the street from the top of one building to another. La Rue intended this year to have it stretched from the Roundup to the Wagon-Tire House. Across this wire Minnie was to walk, dressed as Columbia, with a high spiked diadem upon her head, her whole form outlined with colored fires, and bearing certain rockets which were set off when she reached the center of the street.

Everybody in the Wagon-Tire House liked the girl; Frosty was offensively polite or aggressively insulting; Mrs. La Rue was, as Troy Gilbert said, "a pretty tough specimen"; or, if one would rather follow Aunt Huldah's cheerful and charitable lead, "She looked a heap nicer, and appeared a heap better, in the show than out of it"; the Aërial Wonder was something of a terrestrial

terror; but there was no question that Minnie La Rue was one of the sweetest and best little girls ever brought up in an inappropriate circus.

Therefore, when Kid Barringer appeared, a day after the La Rue family, and told the boys freely what the situation of his affairs was, he received unlimited sympathy and offers of assistance.

"I wish I could help you, Kid," Troy Gilbert said. "There isn't a soul in town that doesn't feel as though that little girl ought to be taken out of that man's keeping. But you see he's her own father, I reckon—says he is—and the law can't go behind that."

"If you boys would fix up a scheme to get me a chance to speak to Minnie—" Kid began. "At first I thought I could steal her just as easy as anything. She'd be glad to go; I had a little note from her— Say, Gib," he broke off suddenly, with a catch in his voice, "he's liable to strike her —to hurt her—when he's drinking."

"Well, if it went as far as that, here in Blowout, I would arrest him, you know," Gilbert suggested.

"It won't," Kid returned dejectedly; "not at the Wagon-Tire House. Aunt Huldy has a good effect on him—or rather bad effect, for that purpose. He's jest behavin' himself so straight, that

Aunt Huldy won't hear a word about him bein' the meanest that ever was."

Troy was thinking intently.

"Say, Kid, I've got an idea. Do you reckon Aunt Huldy thinks too well of Frosty to help us out a little? If she doesn't, I believe the thing's as good as done. I saw that there 'Columbia Enlightening the World' at Emerald last year, and I know exactly how I could fix it so as to let you —well, you wait a minute, and I'll give you all the details. It's the only thing on the program that separates your girl from the Signorina for five minutes."

It must have been that Aunt Huldah saw more harm in Frosty La Rue than she was willing to mention; for an hour later Gilbert had made his arrangements.

"Now, Kid," he counseled, "I want you to make yourself scarce around here from now on. Don't let Frosty know you're in the diggin's at all. We boys are going to give it out that you've gone to Fort Worth, so that he and Mrs. La Rue won't watch Miss Minnie quite so close."

The Kid obediently withdrew from public life, spending most of his days in the back room of the big store, where a few sympathizing friends were always ready to bear him company; and the word went out that he had, in despair, given up camp-



ing on Miss Minnie's trail and gone off to Fort Worth.

This intelligence reaching old man La Rue—Gilbert wondered a little if it were possible any of it came to him through Aunt Huldah—had the desired effect of relaxing the watch upon the girl.

The first move in Gilbert's game was to waylay Frosty's Mexican, and bribe him to feign sickness. To this José promptly consented; and he counterfeited with such vigor, and so to the life, that the proprietor of the show was beside himself; for it was too late to teach a new man the management of the fireworks.

And now came Gilbert's second move. He approached the old man with the inquiry, "Why, what's the racket, Frosty? Something the matter with some of your outfit?"

La Rue sweepingly condemned the whole republic of Mexico in general, and José Romero in particular, winding up with the statement that the no-account greaser had gone and got sick, here at the last minute—Frosty would seem to imply, out of sheer perversity—and when it was too late to teach another his duties.

Upon this, Gilbert unfolded his scheme with a careful carelessness.



"Fireworks? Why, do you know, Frosty, I believe I could do your fireworks for you all right. I know fireworks pretty well, and I saw your 'Columbia' at Emerald, last year."

"And would you do it, Gilbert?" asked La Rue. "It wouldn't *pay*," added the tight-fisted old fellow. "It wouldn't pay *you*—a man like *you;* but—"

"Oh, I just don't want to see the boys disappointed and the show spoiled," rejoined Gilbert. "I don't want any money."

La Rue was almost ready to embrace the sheriff of Wild Horse County. His burdens had not been light, even before the despised José's defection. There was a multitude of things, big and little, which could not well be carried with a show of the sort, but had always to be picked up locally, at the last moment; and a crude little cow-town like Blowout not only failed to supply many of these, but stood, as one might say, with dropped jaw at the very suggestion of them—at the mere mention of their unfamiliar names.

And so the company—otherwise the La Rue family—had to produce much of the paraphernalia out of its inner consciousness; which meant that the old man's temper was continually rasped, that the Signorina's nerves and her ingenuity

were on a strain, and that Minnie was hard at work from dawn till dark, practising between whiles.

Troy Gilbert had put it most hopefully when he said that he knew fireworks pretty well—or one might say that the statement was susceptible of two different interpretations. As a matter of fact, Troy knew fireworks only from the spectator's side of the question.

He now had José Romero moved over into the back room of his place, where he might mitigate the rigors of that alien's confinement, and at the same time receive from the Mexican very necessary instruction.

Mercifully, there was an ample supply of fireworks, for the show was to be repeated at Antelope, over in Lone Jack County, and again at Cinche.

Moreover, drawing heavily, as he had been instructed, upon Kid Barringer's bank account, Gilbert wrote to Fort Worth and ordered a duplicate set of these fireworks sent on to Cinche. And in the darkness of night, when Blowout was wrapped in slumber, Gilbert and Romero rode silently out, down the flank of the divide, across the plain and into a little cañon six or seven miles distant in the breaks of Wild Horse Creek.

All day, in the intervals of his business duties,

Gilbert had been receiving theoretical instructions; now with the set of fireworks which was to have dazzled and delighted the residents of Antelope, he made practical experiment of the knowledge so gained. The little show, witnessed only by the naked walls of the cañon and such prairie-dogs and jack-rabbits as had been untimely aroused from their slumbers, went off fairly well—which is to say that most of Gilbert's fingers and nearly all of his features went back to Blowout sound and entire.

"Oh, I got the hang of the business," he declared again and again, as they rode along through the soft Texas night; "I got the hang of it. I can make the whole first part go all right. The thing now is to get that Columbia act fixed so as to give the boys a run for their money, and leave a chance for Minnie and Kid."

The two rode home, and later José went to bed in Gilbert's back room, where work was going forward upon a mysterious-looking structure.



CHAPTER XIV

COLUMBIA AND THE COWBOY

"In our village hall a Justice stands;
A neater form was never made of board."

Frosty La Rue's grand aggregation of talent had given two shows in a tent on the third of July.

On the Fourth there would again be two tent-shows, one in the afternoon and one at night; and at the close of the night performance, when the "concert" of an ordinary circus takes place, there was to be "a grand open-air spectacle", as Frosty himself put it.

For this purpose a platform had been erected, upon which Frosty and the Signorina could do a knife-throwing turn; and where the Aërial Wonder could give an infantile exhibition with a small bicycle.

A wire had been stretched across Comanche Street from the top of the Roundup to the top of the Wagon-Tire House, and upon this was to be given the most ambitious performance of the evening, "Columbia Enlightening the World".



All day long on the Fourth, the town was full of rejoicing young Texas masculinity, mounted upon Texas ponies, careering about the streets in conspicuously full enjoyment of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And all day long Frosty La Rue's tent-show did a land-office business.

Poor old Frosty! Many of the cowboys could shoot better than he; but they didn't shoot at colored glass balls. The bareback riding also came under some contempt; but the spangles and pink fleshings carried much weight, the Signorina painted most artistically, and, as Aunt Huldah said, "When she was a-goin' right fast on that fat white hoss, with the little flatform on his back, an' a-smilin' an' kissin' her hand, she did really look right nice."

Minnie's trapeze acts were truly fine, and were appreciated at their full value; and the beautiful little figure walking the wire twenty feet above the ground was greeted with unlimited enthusiasm.

When the evening came, old Frosty, inclined to be as nervous and irritable with Gilbert as he dared, came running into the latter's place worrying about the fireworks.

"Now you chase yourself along," advised the sheriff, good-naturedly. "Just get right along,



an' 'tend to your little old illuminated knife-throwin' trick. 'Tain't ten minutes till that's due, an' you've got a crowd that's good for five hundred dollars if it's good for a cent, when you pass the hat. And," he added, delight in the scheme he was working getting the better of his natural instinct for literal truth, "and luck—just fool luck—has sent you the finest fireworks operator in west Texas. Shoo out of here now, an' 'tend to your own job, an' let me 'tend to mine!"

As for the children of the Wagon-Tire House, they were perhaps more glorious on that warm, dark July night than anything in their after lives could make them. This is not to say that the six were not destined for happy or distinguished careers; but, after all, the magnificence of an occasion depends greatly upon the point of view; and the small hill is a high mountain to the little child.

They had been permitted to extend invitations to the more favored of their young friends. Bunt Tarver and Roach Porterman's two small girls, with Eddie Beach, who lived on a ranch outside of Blowout and stayed all night at the Wagon-Tire House (in a state of bliss that was almost cataleptic), were among the little bunch that presented themselves to go upon the roof of the



kitchen, from which a magnificent view of the fireworks was to be had.

"I can't have it," Troy announced. "I can't have you children up here."

"Oh, yes, Gib—oh, yes, you can. They won't—" Aunt Huldah's voice sank to a murmur, which Troy Gilbert answered with a shake of the head.

"Well, ef they do see anything, they'll keep still—my chil'en are trained to mind; and these others are all good people,"—and Aunt Huldah beamed upon the palpitating, expectant, alarmed little band.

"Keep still!"—what an awful phrase for such a connection! Gilbert turned and asked them kindly,. "Will you, kids? Will you keep right still, whatever you see?"

Only Gess and Tell were bold enough to put the horror into words.

"'Tain't no use fer us to promise," Gess said huskily. "We're jest bound to holler when the fireworks begins to go off, even if we had promised cross-yer-heart."

And Tell piped in, after him, as usual:

"W'y, a circus is jest hollerin'—or some hollerin' is the best part of a circus." And he added, with a suspicious tremble in his voice, "I'd



ruther go downstairs an' set in the kitchen, if we can't holler."

Troy burst out laughing at sight of the dejected faces.

"Oh, holler all you want to—holler as much as you can—I don't mean hollerin'. I expect to do some pretty considerable hollerin' myself, and I've got a lot of the boys promised to holler at the right time. But there's to be a little—a little extra performance up here on the roof, and if you see anything queer about it, you mustn't let on—you mustn't tell."

"That's all right," assured Aunt Huldah, turning to descend the narrow little stairway. "They'll do jest as you tell 'em, Gib. Mind you don't tip them soap-boxes over an' fall off'n the roof, chil'en. Sissy, you keep tight hold of Ally's hand—she's apt to fly when the big performance comes,"—and Aunt Huldah's rich, mellow, chuckling laugh came back to them up the stairs.

One would have said that nothing on earth could make matters more glorious to the children of the Wagon-Tire House on this Fourth of July evening; but after Troy Gilbert's words, they trod not upon the earthen roof of the hotel, but on air; they sat not upon soap-boxes, but on thrones.

Nay, kings were small people compared to

them. There was to be a mysterious extra performance, in which the sheriff was implicated; it would take place under their very noses, and they were asked to assist, to keep still about it!

Gilbert had said truly: the crowd was a big one, and most enthusiastic. As a matter of fact, there were nearly a hundred cowboys on hand who had been let into Gilbert's scheme. The fireworks were equally successful whether they blazed splendidly or fizzled ingloriously. It was enough for the boys that Troy Gilbert was doing the act; they whooped at every figure, and whooped again at Troy's unaccustomed drollery.

There was a strain of intense expectancy in the audience, communicated, though without their knowledge, to those not in the secret from those who were; so that the crowd was wildly eager, without altogether knowing why.

After the display of pin-wheels, fiery serpents, bouquets, Roman candles and rockets, old Frosty and Mrs. Frosty (otherwise the Signorina Ippolita di Castelli) came on the small platform to do their knife-throwing act, the knives trailing fiery tails. This kept the audience entertained during the time necessary to prepare the Columbia act.

"Bet you'd be scared to do that," whispered Eddie Beach.



"Bet I wouldn't," Gess made answer. "I'd jest as soon sling them old knives—Mr. La Rue said me an' Tell was likely boys to train. I bet Ally'd hold as still as the Signorina 'f I was to throw them knives at her."

For the Columbia performance Gilbert had, during the day, stretched another wire about five feet and three inches above the big wire on which Minnie was to walk. Indeed, it was this secondary wire which had caused the eruption of old Frosty demanding to "know".

When the knife-throwing act was finished, there was a short pause followed by a little murmur of applause; and this grew louder and louder, until it was a medley of whoops, yells, stamping, and calls in every tone and key for the next act—the grand stroke of the performance. Frosty and the Signorina forbore to go upon the roof of the Roundup to receive Minnie, until they should see her start from the roof of the hotel.

Figures were seen upon the top of the Wagon-Tire House (both roofs were flat) and Frosty strained his eyes eagerly at that end of the big wire. The wondering children drew back and refrained even from whispering among themselves—Troy's caution was not needed. Strange doings, indeed, were going forward about the end of the wire. Troy Gilbert was apparently push-



"The wondering children drew back and refrained even from whispering among themselves. PAGE 108.



ing a reluctant figure toward it—it looked as though the person were tied, and he laughed and struck her when she seemed unwilling!

Finally, Columbia began to move out slowly along the wire. She was everything that audience or proprietor could desire. The spiked tiara was on her head, blazing with violet light. Down her back hung her fair curling hair; in her hands was the long balancing pole—Columbia's scepter of power; and her white draperies were illuminated with fires of blue and crimson and violet.

The children stared, silent, motionless, expectant. They were nearer than those in the street and had had opportunity to observe the irregularity of Columbia's launching.

There was a little outburst of applause when she first appeared. But as she moved out over the wire, the silence was so complete that the coughing of one of the patient ponies on the outskirts of the crowd was plainly audible.

Those in the secret were silent, in ecstasies of admiration. The children kept still because they had been told to—whatever they saw. Those not instructed were mute with amazement—a sort of creeping awe.

Most of the audience had seen Minnie that afternoon in the tent-show, her slender girlish form clad in spangled gauze, her delicate blonde



prettiness enhanced by her attire, doing her trapeze acts. She had then moved with the lithe grace of a young deer; her face had been all eager animation. What sort of thing was this, that seemed to advance along the wire as though it were on casters—that was never seen to take a step? What face was this, strange, staring, immobile as a face carved in wood?

"Gee!" murmured one of the X Q K boys, who had come in late and was uninformed. "Gee, I ain't been a-drinkin' a thing—what in the name o' pity ails that gal!"

"Great Scott! she gives me the mauley-grubs! Ugh!" and his companion shivered. But save for these murmured comments, the crowd was intensely still.

Suddenly, about the middle of the street, Columbia's forward movement slackened, checked altogether. This was not unexpected, for midway the rockets, fastened about her waist and upon her crown, were to be discharged. The manner in which these latter went off brought shrieks and groans from the crowd below. They fizzed up into Columbia's face, they burned against her bodice, they struck her arms. "Oh! oh! Poor soul! she'll have her eyes put out! She'll be killed!" cried a woman's voice from the street.



"I might 'a' known better than to trust that fool Gilbert with them fireworks," groaned old Frosty. "That there girl is worth more'n a hundred dollars a month to me. If I was to take her East I could hire her out for two hundred, easy, an' here she's likely to get all crippled up, so's't she won't never be no account."

Columbia was the only person unmoved by all the fiery demonstrations; she stood rigid, looking strangely massive and tall, till the last rocket had spent itself. Then her progress began again with a sort of jerk. A shudder went over her frame, the pole wavered in her hands—those hands that seemed so limp and lifeless—she tottered, made a violent movement with her head, then swayed out sidewise and fell—holding the pole tight in her hands!

And the strangest sound went up from that big assembly, a mingled sound of groans and smothered outcries, and also what one might have sworn—had it not seemed impossible—was wild hysteric laughter.

Gess and Tell and Eddie Beach, luxuriating in Troy's permission to "holler as much as they pleased", emitted shrieks that would have chilled the blood of any whom this strange spectacle had not already terrified.

For, instead of falling to the ground twenty



feet below, as would have been natural, and lying there, a mangled body, Columbia hung to the wire, a mad, fantastic, incredible spectacle, head downward, in a blaze of inverted patriotic splendor!

The wildest confusion ensued. Frosty was beside himself. He simply danced and yelled where he stood. Those who were in the secret shouted themselves hoarse with rapture, capering like dervishes, embracing one another; those who were not, screamed with horror and dismay.

As all gazed fascinated, something drifted down from the hanging figure. A cowboy plunged forward, caught it up, and there broke upon the sudden stillness which had followed this incident, a roar of hearty laughter, as he held high in the blaze of light that came from the pendent figure, Columbia's wooden-seeming countenance—a false face!

Instantly, the shouting and confusion broke out again. The figure began to sway; and the light draperies were ignited by some bit of fire which had been brought into contact with them by the inversion of Columbia's proper position.

The figure showed that, beyond the streaming golden hair—the beautiful fair hair which Aunt Huldah had cut from Daisy's head, and which

Daisy had given with loving generosity—and the stuffed-out waist of Columbia's classic robe, the only anatomy Columbia possessed was an upright post with a wheel at the bottom—a caster indeed! —which had run upon the big wire.

At the top of Columbia's head there had been another wheel, which ran, trolley-like, upon the upper wire; and a slender wire traveling along the lower, or footway wire, had drawn the figure forward.

Some obstacle had been met in the overhead wire; and when the figure was jerked forward, harder and harder, to overcome this, the upper attachment finally gave way entirely and allowed the figure to fall. Only Gilbert's precaution of looping a heavy wire from axle to axle of the lower wheel around the footway wire, had prevented Columbia from falling to the ground.

As the explanation began to spread over the crowd—not in whispers, but in shouts, mingled with roars of laughter—those who had been instructed beforehand pressed round old Frosty and the Signorina in a dense mass.

Threats, complaints, demands, all sorts of outcries filled the air.

"You old fakir!"

"What do you mean by it, Frosty?"



"Do you think you're a-goin' to run a blazer like this on us, an' we'll swaller hit like hit was catnip tea?"

"What fer did ye want to fool us thataway?"

"We ain't a-goin' to stand it—we'll—"

"Gentlemen, jest be quiet. Let me out—let me git across the street to the Wagon-Tire—where my daughter is—and I can explain things."

"Explain nothin'!" was the cry; "you'll explain right here! Do you think Blowout is a-goin' to stand this kind o' thing?"

"Who put you up to run this blazer on us? Them fellers at Plain View? Er them scrubs at Cinche? This town ain't a-goin' to stand it!"

"Gentlemen," came Frosty's pipe again, "gentlemen, let me out—jest let me git to my daughter—let me git out o' here before it's too late! This is some o' that scoundrel Kid Barringer's doin's. Let me out, gentlemen!"

But the old man had gone the wrong way about it. Kid was one of them, a good fellow, and much liked. Even those who knew nothing now scented a romance. The big crowd hemmed old Frosty in and held him there with pretended wrath and resentment.

At the back door of the Wagon-Tire House,



just before the wooden Columbia appeared to the eyes of Blowout, a meeting had taken place. From that door Aunt Huldah had stepped with Minnie clinging to her arm. In the dense shadow Kid Barringer was waiting with two of the best ponies in Wild Horse County. He came eagerly forward.

"Kid," said Aunt Huldah's heartsome voice, "here's Minnie—I've brung her to you. I b'lieve we're doin' right. You're a good boy, Kid. An' I know you love her an' will take keer o' her. Ef you wasn't to, you'd shore have me to fight!" And she chuckled genially.

"Good-by, honey. Ye needn't to look skeered. We-all have got ye now, an' we'll take keer of ye —the hull kit an' bilin' of us. Good-by, bless your sweet little heart!"

And with the word Minnie was in her saddle, swung there by her lover's strong arms, and away across the levels beside him.

And while, back in Blowout, the Signorina fairly clawed, cat-like, to get through that wall of cowboys and across the street to where (believing Kid Barringer to be as far away as Fort Worth) she had left Minnie scarce half an hour before, to make ready for the Columbia act, while she herself went to do the knife-throwing turn—while the old man shouted and swore and



protested and fairly wept with rage and apprehension, Kid Barringer reached his left hand out to his companion, saying:

"Slack him down a little, honey; we're safe now. Mr. Ferguson, the Presbyterian preacher —he's promised me—I told him—an' he's a-goin' to marry us. His place ain't half a mile further on—an' he's warned an' is lookin' fer us. We're safe now, my poor little girl."

The cowboys, with roars of delight, fished down the remains of the dangling Columbia, while the original performer, to whom Columbia's figure was understudy, stood in Mr. Ferguson's little parlor, waiting for that gentleman to bring in a second witness. Her little fair head was resting on Kid's broad shoulder; Kid's arm was around her slender figure; and Minnie was saying, between laughter and tears:

"Kid, how do you reckon that old machine Columbia is getting along with my turn, back there at Blowout?"

And the happy bridegroom made blissful answer: "I don't know—or keer—honey. She can go it on her head for all of us, can't she? She give us our chance to get away, and that was all we wanted. Aunt Huldy is the Lord's own people. I'll never forget her. You wouldn't hardly 'a' thought I was good enough, if Aunt



Huldy hadn't a-recommended me. I don't believe. My little girl ain't never a-goin' to get to walk no more wires."



CHAPTER XV

GETTING READY FOR THE EXHIBITION

"They are sighin', speechifyin', got the reins without a check,
An' the boy is still a-standin' on the usual burnin' deck!
An' Iser's rollin' rapidly—you almost see it shine;
An' some are born at Bingen—at Bingen on the Rhine!
They're goin' like two-forty; the town can't get to sleep,
For, Pilot, 'tis a fearful night, there's danger on the deep."

As the close of school neared, the teacher announced her intention of having an exhibition. Blowout was without amusement of an innocent character, and this school exhibition assumed a municipal importance hard for people of eastern communities to understand. The town was soon full of rumors as to the novelties and the wonders of this school exhibition.

Buck Tarver's little boy was to speak a piece twen-ty-sev-en-vers-es-long—yes, sir!—and verses mean stanzas, mind you, in Blowout vernacular. Mrs. Carter had promised to come in and assist. It was thought that she would let her hair down (this hair was seen to be a beautiful golden-red, known to be very long, and Mrs.



Carter was extremely proud of it) and wear her wedding dress, while she sang or recited a sentimental selection concerning a bride.

It had long ago been discovered that Daisy could play. She had been fitting herself for a music teacher, back in her home in Ohio; and she was expected to have something extra prepared for the organ on this occasion.

As for the Wagon-Tire House, it was a place of mysteries and surprises during the preparation for the exhibition. At almost any moment during the day you might hear about the house some little voice pipe up,

Three little bugs in a basket
And only room for two—

Or one would inquire,

Which way does the wind come—
Which way does he go?
He rides over water,
And over the snow.

While another might declare,

I come from a land of the sun-bright deep—

Mrs. Patterson at first picked out for Sissy's recitation Mr. Moore's famous lines in which a



disconsolate individual declares that he "never loved a tree or flower but 'twas the first to fade away." After Aunt Huldah had, for several days, heard the child lamenting that she "never tamed a wild gazelle to glad her with its bright, dark eye," and mournfully casting up other accounts against the cosmos, she went privately to the teacher and remonstrated.

"Sissy, she's a little given thataway, anyhow," Huldah said. "I don't want to have her speak a piece that's got sech a lot of complaint in it. W'y, she's cryin' all the time she's a-sayin' it."

"That's the best part of it," Mrs. Patterson admitted. "Her tears was so appropriate." She had often found Narcissa's tears inappropriate; and she had grasped eagerly at this opportunity for utilizing them.

"Don't you do it," Huldah counseled. "You jest give her a cheerful piece. Or ef there has to be any cryin' in it, let her cry over somebody else's troubles. She's a little given to see her own sorrows, an' she's too good a child not to be he'ped out o' that."

The next day, Narcissa was heard confiding to the broom-handle, or dishes, or towel, as she went about her work, that she was seven. She stepped somnambulistically about the table, handing the wrong dishes, persisting in an undertone



(whatever was said to her), "Nay, master, we are seven."

The boarders found this an opportunity for wit.

"Seven?" echoed Kid Barringer. "W'y, I'd 'a' took you fer twelve or thirteen, any day."

Roach Porterman amended the jest, which did not reach Sissy at all.

"Did ye say seven? Well, they ain't but one of you come yet, is they? Where's t'other six?"

Aunt Huldah asserted that the Wagon-Tire House was as good as a show, any time, during those days, and that she had a mind to charge an admission.

"Aunt Huldy—Aunt Huldy!" shouted Gess and Tell in a chorus, bursting in one day. "Teacher's found a piece fer us that's got our names—right there in the book—our names—you can see them printed out, an' we're to speak it together." It never occurred to the twins that they could do anything otherwise than "together."

"I'm a-goin' to be Gessler," Gess explained; "an' he's a tyrunt. A tyrunt does thisaway," folding his arms and puckering his brow and glaring at his brother.

"Yes, but I'm a-goin' to be Tell—I am Tell, o' course, anyhow, an' I'm a-goin' to be William

Tell in the piece. An' I'm a awful good man—turrible good—"

"But I'm turrible bad," cut in Gess, jealously, as he saw the impression the other was making.

"An' Romey, he's goin' to be my little boy an' have a apple on his head," added Tell.

"Don't want no apple on my head," howled Romey. "It wouldn't stay on, nohow. Teacher tried to make it stay on, to-day."

"Well, we're a-goin' to tie it with a string,—er stick it with paste, er gum, er something," Gess announced, evidently trembling for the success of the piece in which he was to be tyrant.

"An' then I'm a-goin' to shoot a narrow at the apple and split it ker-smack through the middle; an' that'll make Gess be beat," Tell proclaimed.

"Look-a-here, honey chil'en, I don't like this talk about shootin' a apple off'n my baby-child's head. I guess we'll have to leave the shootin' part out," Aunt Huldah remonstrated.

"I won't be it—I won't be it," roared Romey.

"Well, I jest wish 't Ally was a boy," Tell exclaimed in disgust. "She'd have a apple, or anything, on her head, an' let you shoot it off ef you wanted to."

"Oh, yes, let me be it!" Ally pleaded.



"Well, let her be it, then," Romey sulked. "It's all girls is good fer, anyhow."

Here Aunt Huldah once more interfered.

"Do you know that's what you mus'n't say?" she reminded them. "Boys is jest as good as girls, and girls is jest as good as boys, in Aunt Huldy's house. Aunt Huldy loves one jest as much as t'other."

"Well, Tell, he was a heap better man than Gessler was," Tell began.

"Huh! but Gessler, he was boss," Gess broke in.

"But Tell, he beat at last," Tell shouted triumphantly.

The elevating and diverting dialogue concerning William Tell and the apple was finally arranged and performed at the school exhibition at Blowout. The bow and arrow used on that occasion were strictly for pictorial effect. The apple was affixed to Romey's head by means of a bit of wax. He stood close to the white sheet curtain at the back of the stage, and at the instant the arrow was supposed to be shot, Huldah herself reached through a slit in the sheet and whisked the fruit away, drawing from the youthful scion of the house of Tell a most natural "Yip!" which was held by the audience to be a proper demonstration



on the part of a boy who had just had an apple shot off his head.

Bunt Tarver's piece, which began gloriously with its twenty-seven stanzas, which his maw "was goin' to teach him ef she had to set up nights to do it," came down through various diminutions until it reached six verses descriptive of a storm at sea.

The crying need of this exhibition seemed to be something the children could "act out". If you have never attended a little country school, you do not know what this means—but perhaps you can guess.

Those who feel the craving for this fuller expression have no knowledge of the theater, much less of the modern taste for vaudeville. It proves that this yearning to see the song, or the "piece" acted out, is native, and was the origin of opera and drama.

Miss Belle suggested for this purpose *The Rosebush,* a lachrymose ditty of German origin, which Aunt Huldah had only to hear wailed through the Wagon-Tire House half a dozen times, with suggestions of how they were going to have a grave in the last scene, and dead rose-leaves drifting over it, to vote down promptly.

"Oh, don't have somethin' to make folks cry," she remonstrated. "People can mostly find



somethin' to cry about without goin' to a show, or a exhibition to hunt fer it. Now you talk about havin' Miz' Patterson stand in one o' them there tableaux with a widder's veil on her head—an' that p'intedly is bad luck. I ain't a believer in signs an' luck, mostly; but I do say that anybody that puts on widder's weeds, without call fer the same, is jest a-darin' Providence to give 'em good reason to wear 'em."

"How do I know but I've as good a right to wear widder's weeds as anybody?" sniffed Mrs. Patterson.

Aunt Huldah turned, with a curious expression, and put her hand on the younger woman's shoulder.

"Would you wear mournin' fer him, ef you thought he was dead?" she asked in a low tone.

Mrs. Patterson considered.

"I reckon I would, Miz' Sarvice. It comes to me more and more that Bob is dead; and I—yes, I reckon I'd wear mournin'."

Huldah's face beamed.

"I'll bet you don't have no call to wear mournin' fer your husband," she said genially. "I shouldn't wonder if he was to come in from—that is, come in on the stage, any o' these days. Looks like the good Lord sends people when they're wanted; an' ef you begin to feel kindly



to'ds Mr. Patterson, you'll—well, you'll git news—an' I'll bet on it!"

Since the sojourn of the La Rue show at the Wagon-Tire House, Gess and Tell—and even Ally—had been walking clothes-lines, and falling off barrels—which they attempted to navigate, clown fashion—with varying success. They offered their accomplishments in this line for the exhibition, but the proposition was not accepted.

The trapeze suggestion, however, led the teacher to contemplate the acting out of *Curfew Shall Not Ring To-night.* It was to be recited by Mrs. Patterson herself, unless Myrella Porterman could manage to learn it before the important night. The crowning tableau of this series was to be Sissy in a long white dress, hanging from the clapper of a wooden bell, which swung her out of the window of its belfry at every stroke.

The stage carpentering for this tableau proved its downfall in a very practical sense. Sissy got off with a few bruises, and the attempt was abandoned.

Huldah drew upon her memory, which was extensive, for old ballads. She suggested a very sprightly duet—which may be found in clipped form in books of nursery rhymes, but which still survives as a song among the rural dwellers of



the South—in which a swain accosts an old woman, and inquires if she will darn his stockings.

Being musically informed that she is entirely deaf, and unable to hear what he has said, he moves forward to the inquiry as to whether she has a daughter or not.

Finding her still unable to comprehend, he sings:

Old woman, old woman, shall I kiss you dearly?

and she replies,

Speak a little louder, sir, I kinder think I hear ye.

Encouraged by this, he proceeds to a proposal of marriage, whereupon she (it was suggested that she throw up her hands and look surprised, when she acted this out) warbles sweetly,

Laws a massy, bless my soul, I jist begin to hear ye!

The wit of this being well suited to the audience, it was finally arranged for, along with another of Aunt Huldah's ballads, more widely



known, perhaps, under the name of, *Where are you going, my pretty maid?*

Roach Porterman's Myrella was the scornful pretty maid in this case, and she did it very nicely, the tune helping her to remember the words.

Altogether, the exhibition, like many other festivals, was well-nigh as delicious in the anticipation and preparation as in the fact. Aunt Huldah's strong, patient, serene personality was in all that concerned her children, and smoothed out many an incipient quarrel, explained away many a jealousy, so that they actually came to the great evening itself without serious friction.



CHAPTER XVI

THE GREAT NIGHT

"It's true I never spoke before,
But that's no reason why—
Because I never spoke before—
I need not now to try."

When the great night came (just so much greater than the night of the circus as it is greater to execute, to be a show yourself, than it is merely to look on at one) the little schoolhouse was lovingly decorated. All the flags and streamers in Blowout were upon the walls. Wreaths of evergreen had been brought from the scrub cedar thickets in the breaks of the little river six miles to the westward.

But most important of all, a stage had been constructed where the teacher's platform usually stood, and a curtain of green calico suspended by rings and wire before it.

The prefatory number was a song, which the children of thirty years ago delighted in—*Rain on the Roof*. Its swinging melody was repeated, hummed with closed lips, after each stanza, and



one hundred and fifty little finger-ends drummed softly on the sides of their books, giving exactly the sound of a rain-shower on the roof, to accompany this refrain:

Every tinkle on the shingles
Has an echo in my heart;
And a thousand dreamy fancies
Into busy being start—
And a thousand recollections
Weave their bright hues into woof,
As I listen to the murmur
Of the soft rain on the roof.

So sang the childish voices, and after them came the soft patter of rain.

"Ain't it jest as natural as life?" Aunt Huldah whispered to her neighbor. "I declare I can smell the rain—it seems like it jest must be pourin' out o' doors."

The children, each glorious in his best, smiled importantly as they drummed, and looked delight at the astonished faces of their elders.

After a pause, delicious, terrible, heart-shaking, the opening piece was announced. Mrs. Patterson had put Bunt Tarver first upon the program, because of a flaw in his pronunciation which required that he be ardently, not to say



violently, coached up to the last minute, and shot upon the stage red-hot, as it were. In the last stanza of Bunt's piece were the words,

'But his little daughter whispered, as she took 'his icy 'hand—

Now Bunt had always mispronounced the word "whisper", giving it as "whisker". When the difference—of which Bunt himself had been wholly unconscious—was explained and detailed to him by means of spelling, he became hopelessly muddled. He was as likely to say "whisper" as "whisker"; but then, he was as likely to say "whisker" as "whisper". 'Aunt Huldah, who had a knack in such matters, had labored with him, and succeeded only in adding very much to his confusion. She finally told him that she would sit in the middle of the front row; Bunt was to look fixedly at her, and if he said this word wrong she would shake her head; when he would go back and say it right.

"Because," 'Aunt Huldah explained to him, "this here is our own exhibition, and we ain't none of us goin' to git scared; but ef we make a mistake, we'll turn round an' make it right."

Bunt walked out the little lane between the green calico curtain and the kerosene lamps from



the Wagon-Tire House, each with its tin reflector behind it, paused in the center of the stage, and made that sudden duck or dive, which is the small boy's bow the world over. His round face was pale beneath the freckles; if they could have touched his snub nose, they would have found it cold.

Clutching his stubby little hands into fists, and with his head held down as though he were facing a driving rain, he galloped through the earlier portion of his recitation. Then came the stanza in which was the fatal word. He threw up his bullet head with a snort, looked Aunt Huldah squarely in the eye, and shouted in a strained, unnatural voice, quite different from the cheerful, trundling murmur in which he had been speaking:

"But his little"—a gasp—*"daughter's whiskers—"*

Aunt Huldah shook her head so violently that she looked like some sort of mechanical toy.

Bunt gasped.

Aunt Huldah's head became stationary, and she looked encouragingly at her little partner.

He tried it again:

"But his little daughter's whiskers—whiskers —whiskers—whis—"

His confident voice trailed, drooped.



He threw up his bullet head with a snort, looked Aunt Huldah squarely in the eye and shouted in a strange unnatural voice
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Aunt Huldah's head was shaking away again —her head looked positively dangerous—and there had been a decided snicker among some of the cowboys at the back of the room.

Bunt swallowed a sob, looked at Aunt Huldah, and would have valiantly tackled his problem again; but a big voice called from a back bench:

"Aw, never mind his little daughter's whiskers —let his little daughter go an' shave—tell us if that there ship got to the shore."

And Bunt, grasping this opportune advice, skipped the fatal line and rushed on to the close of his poem and into harbor, with colors flying. Another duck, and he was panting back to the seats and the other children, covered with glory.

After Bunt's piece, Daisy played *The Maiden's Prayer* on the organ.

It was announced to the audience very loudly that this piece was called *The Maiden's Prayer;* and in addition, as the performer came to that movement in which her left hand crossed over her right upon the keyboard, the green calico curtains slowly parted, persuaded thereto by strings attached to their selvages, and disclosed Sissy in a little white gown, devoutly kneeling, with folded hands and raised eyes.

She held her position and her look of rapt devotion like a young martyr, while Gilbert tried



—and failed twice—at the tableau fire. Finally, a rosy glow encircled her, and the piece on the organ was settling down comfortably into the bass notes.

The acrid odor of the tableau fire made the audience cough, but heroic Sissy was rigid as a rock; only, the smoke getting into her eyes caused great tears to roll down her cheeks.

The curtains were pulled together, drawn apart for a second glimpse, and pulled together again, amid Oh's and Ah's of admiration and delight.

"But how on earth they ever got that child to cry so natural, just exactly in the right spot, is more than I can tell," Mrs. Porterman whispered to Aunt Huldah. "My children cry a plenty; but the trouble 'd be to get 'em to cry at the right time."

Myrella Porterman and Mart Adams held the boards after this, in *The Gypsy Countess*. Myrella had on a short scarlet skirt—to state the matter fully, it was made of turkey-red calico, was Myrella's skirt—a white waist and a black velvet girdle; this convocation of garments being known in stage-land from all time as the traditional dress of a gypsy maiden.

Mart wore tall boots, and a hat with a feather in it, which stamped him at once as a knight of almost any period.



Those who did not hear *The Gypsy Countess* in their youth would never know from cold type and paper what its charms are; and those who have, do not need to be told; enough to say that its romance, its sentiment, charmed the Blowout audience to the soul.

One of Aunt Huldah's favorite songs was *Roll on, Silver Moon;* and despite her protests, Mrs. Patterson fastened upon it as an excellent one for exhibition purposes. Callie Grainger sang it, and the moon was managed by means of the traditional milk-pan and candle.

The stage was darkened, which meant the darkening of the entire room. A black curtain had been hung along its back, and the milk-pan, with its candle inside and its cover of pale yellow tissue paper, was poked up from below by means of the long handle riveted to its back by Roach Porterman, and began to rise with the first stanza.

Roll on, silver moon, guide the trav'ler on his way,
While the nightingale's song is in tu-une,
But I never, never more with my true love shall stray,
By the light of the sweet silver moon,

warbled Callie.



The moon rose, and rolled on obediently—Gess and Tell had it in charge, and their combined energy was really too much for one moon. It had rolled as far as the middle of the sky, rising as it went, before the second verse was completed.

"I'm mighty afraid them boys'll git to goin' too fast, and git acrost before Callie can finish up," Aunt Huldah muttered; and the young vocalist seemed to be possessed by the same fear, for she glanced apprehensively at the moon, and quickened her vocal pace.

Her enthusiasm was contagious, and the moon took a spurt of speed and ran ahead of her. It was neck and neck from that on, Callie racing desperately for the wire—one could hear her gasp between lines—and the boys evidently fearing that the song might close before they had done their part with credit.

The strain induced by these conditions resulted in rapid, one might say reckless, traveling on the part of the moon-bearer; and as the last repetition of *Sweet Silver Moon,* died away, Gess (who was the man with the moon, if not the man in the moon) missed his footing, and that luminary went down with startling suddenness. Also, it set in a direct line, almost at a right angle with the course it had been pursuing. Still, the spectacle was held to be a good one.



The most ambitious undertaking in the whole exhibition was the acting out with tableaux of *The Mistletoe Bough.* A quartet, of which Daisy was the soprano, Huldah the alto, Gilbert the tenor, and Roach Porterman the bass, sang the ballad, standing about the little organ in front of the stage. Upon the stage were given ten tableaux, representing scenes in the song.

For this purpose the resources of Blowout and the surrounding country had been drained; there was nothing it could offer to augment the glory of the spectacle, which was not represented there.

Young Lovell was Mr. Hardaway, the son of the proprietor of the New Orleans Store. The bride was no less a personage than Mrs. Carter. A bride's dress and veil must be had; Mrs. Carter was known to possess these; and it was known also that they were of a very superior quality.

When asked to appear in the tableau she showed unexpected complaisance.

"Now that's jest as I thought about Miz' Carter," Aunt Huldah said. "She's really lonesome, and she'd like to be friendly and mix in with some of the little pleasures and doin's we have here. I'm glad I told ye to ast her."

Those who know the old ballad remember the swinging measure and the wailing pathos of its



refrain. As the first strains which announced that

The mistletoe hung in the baron's hall,
And the holly-branch gleamed on the oaken wall,
And the baron's retainers were blithe and gay,
Keeping their Christmas holiday,

were sung, the curtains parted to show a stately minuet being danced upon the stage. Mrs. Carter and the Adams girls had labored over their costumes for weeks. Mrs. Carter herself wore her wedding dress and veil, and the admiration which the spectacle excited was deserved. The last low stately bow of the dance upon the stage came with the end of the stanza. The scenes that followed, as presented upon the little stage, were received with unvarying delight. They were not tableaux merely; but the happenings of the song were indeed "acted out" in dumb show.

Presently the curtains were parted to show the great chest open in the center of the stage, and Mrs. Carter stealing toward it, looking over her shoulder with laughing mischievous eyes, checking, halting, laughing a little and then running forward; finally laying her white hand upon its edge and creeping in, as the singers came to the lines,



"I am weary of dancing now," she cried;
"Stay, tarry a moment, I'll hide—I'll hide!"

The enthusiasm knew no bounds. And indeed the picture was a pretty one.

Now the chest had to be hinged at the bottom, and free at its four corners, so that (an ancient and moldering thing) it could drop apart, revealing the bridal robe, when after an interval of fifty years the aged bridegroom at last learns what had become of his fair young bride.

The stanza had been sung,

And when Lovell appeared, the children cried,
"See, the old man mourns for his fairy bride!"

Young Mr. Hardaway had staggered across the stage, supported by a monstrous walking-stick, with a long white beard fastened upon his face; Gess and Tell and Ally and Eddie Beach, with half a dozen others, following and pointing at him with the greatest enthusiasm. And now came the crowning scene of the story, in which the chest falls apart before the eyes of the aged bridegroom, and the pathetic dust that was his bride is found amid the yellowed bridal dress, the gems, and the beautiful hair.

Mrs. Carter had wasted a portion of her time



during the preceding scene chatting with Doctor McChesney. Now she flew to the dressing-room and attempted to give them the gown and veil to put in the chest.

"I can't get it off in time—I just can't—Oh, my goodness—my fingers are all thumbs!" she panted. "What shall we do, Mrs. Sarvice?" For Aunt Huldah, despairing of ever being permitted to sing again, had gone around behind the scenes to see what was the matter.

"Git right in as you are," Huldah counseled. "We've waited quite a spell as it is. Jest turn your face away from the folks, an' tousle that great head o' hair up, and it won't show that they's any person in the dress. We'd have to have the hair—you fergot to bring that switch you was goin' to lend us. Take your own hair down instead—here, let me he'p ye out with the hairpins—there!"

As this seemed to be the only course possible, Mrs. Carter consented. Huldah got the long hair mostly free and flowing, and the bride gathered up her draperies, fled to the stage, jumped into the chest, and as the children expressed it, "scrooched down" any fashion. The lid was hastily dropped, the curtains pulled apart, and the song began.

The personages of the ballad were grouped



about. All were deeply stricken in years, and were plentifully reinforced with children who were supposed to have come up in the interim.

Poor Mrs. Carter! In her nervous haste, she had carelessly assumed a position which she now found she could not hold. Aware of the frailty of her prison, she kept from pressing upon the sides as long as she could. When a hand slipped and she finally did so, she found that the lid was up a bit, which left the front and sides free, and almost ready to drop out.

The gay young girl who was to open the chest as a joke, was stepping toward it, making motions indicative of her belief that there was something interesting in the coffer, when, with a muffled shriek, "I can't help it!" the ends fell out with a rattle, Mrs. Carter's head with its beautiful mop of red-gold hair, popping forth at one end, two white satin-slippered feet poking suddenly out at the other.

The singers went resolutely on. Young Lovell gave one glance at his extremely lively bride, covered his face with his hands and apparently sobbed—at least he was shaking from head to foot, as the curtains were drawn together.

It was Aunt Huldah who drew victory out of this defeat.

"I don't care," she said sturdily, "it was a



heap cheerfuller endin' than the other. I don't like this here thing of havin' skeletons an' sich on the stage. I think it looked jest cheerful an' natural, to see Miz' Carter a-pokin' her head an' her feet out o' that there chist—I wish't she hadn't 'a' cried about it afterwards, though."

Martin Burke had firmly insisted upon his being the closing number on the program.

Martin's contribution was a composition, and when he brought the sheets to Mrs. Patterson for correction, as was the rule, he looked a little defiant. The title ran, *'A Tribute to My School-Teacher,* and the body of the text was full of warm eulogy of her noble traits and her personal charms.

Mrs. Patterson drew her pencil through some extremely complimentary remarks concerning the color and expression of her eyes.

"You know, Mart," she deprecated, "it isn't a matter of school-teaching, whether a person's eyes are brown or blue. If you were just writing a fancy piece, that would be all right. You've wrote it very pretty, but I am obliged to take out that about how your school-teacher looks when she's pleased or displeased."

Even as amended, Martin's composition was calculated to make his rival feel extremely small.



But alas, and alas! when he rose to read it, the very thought of how George was to shrivel fluttered his pulse and brought a tightness in his throat. It is one thing to make a declaration of the state of one's affections to the object of them; it is quite another to get up before a room full of children and their parents, and under the flimsy disguise of a school composition pour out one's emotions.

Martin's face was crimson; the room seemed to expand and contract before his tortured vision. He could no more see the sheets of paper which hung rattling in his nerveless hand than he could see the moon smiling calmly down on the roof of the little school-house outside.

"He's scared," the whisper ran through the room.

"He's awful sweet on teacher, an' he's wrote a composition 'at pretty-near says so, an' now he's scared to read it," communicated one of the big girls to another.

The pause was growing inordinately long, and the silence was more than oppressive. Suddenly Mart found a voice somewhere down in the soles of his boots; it creaked a little, but he dragged it to the surface and enunciated, "A Tribute to My—"



There he stuck. There was another lengthened and terrible stillness, broken by a snicker from George Pardee.

That settled it.

"A Tribute to My Skeel-Toocher!" shouted Martin, and then wondered why everybody shrieked with laughter.

When quiet was once more restored, the boy had had time to realize his mistake; but there was courage in him, and dogged persistence. He began again.

"A Tribute to My—" Dreading that he might again mispronounce the words, he hesitated just an instant, and then resumed—"A Tribute to My Teel-Skoocher."

That probably would have been the end of it, if George Pardee had not said, in that peculiar undertone which can be heard all over a room: "Looks like he's got a whole tribe o' freaks that he's payin' a tribute to."

This was not to be borne. Martin was up and at it again before the roars of laughter had died away. And this time he made it,

"A Tribute to My Tool-Skeacher."

The yell of laughter that brought would have driven him from the boards, if Huldah Sarvice had not risen in the audience to say:

"Never you mind, Mart; we're all friends here;



you jest take a long breath, an' count twenty, an' go ahead."

And following this kindly advice, Martin then and there read, and was applauded for, "A Tribute to My School-Teacher."

Yet, with that applause there mingled unseemly bursts of reminiscent laughter; and to this day the story is told on the cattle ranges of Wild Horse County.



CHAPTER XVII

REMINISCENCES

"In men whom men condemn as ill
I find so much of goodness still,
In men whom men esteem divine
I find so much of sin and blot—
I hesitate to draw the line
Between the two—when God has not."

The keynote of everything about the Wagon-Tire House was comfort; it was a home in spite of being a hotel.

Nobody had such vines as Aunt Huldah Sarvice, and vines in the glowing southwest plains-country—where lumber is high, and porches and shutters luxuries for the wealthy—are the comfort of summer life. The beautiful *loofa* or dish-rag gourd vines that wreathed and garlanded the long, narrow back porch (which was just a strip of earth roof, supported by poles) were Huldah's especial pride, and the delight of the children.

Romey had not been with her when the gourd vines fruited the previous year, and he was full of anticipation.

"Aunt Huldy," he asked, "will the dish-rags

jest hang on the vine, an' you can go an' pick 'em off? An' where is they now, Aunt Huldy—where is the dish-rags now? Is they squeezed up in them little seeds what you's a-plantin'?"

The gathering and cutting of the gourds in the autumn was a great occasion. Some offered yards of a narrow lace-like filament, as crisp as straw braid, from which Aunt Huldah told the children she had, in her youth, made "many a bonnet"; others contained a stiff, hard, spongy mass suited for a dish-rag.

On that same back porch, when the vines began to shade it sufficiently, was the long dining-table set. Only second to the rapture of a picnic dinner, to the child, is this setting of the family table upon a porch or in the yard. So many unexpected shifts are brought about by it, so many sights and sounds are present at the meal, which the house would exclude.

Aunt Huldah always covered her table—which must stand constantly set ready for the next meal—with a pink mosquito net. At each place was laid a slice of bread, a biscuit, and, on very festive occasions, a cooky or two.

How Roach Porterman's burro came to know this, one can not say; but it became so common a performance for her—vagrant that she was, always loitering through the streets, and hanging



about people's back doors—to watch for a moment when the table was unprotected, sneak quietly in on her four small, light-stepping feet, and circle gravely round the board, clearing it of every edible morsel, that one of the children had to be detailed to stand guard.

Twice, after the days were chilly and the table had gone back to the dining-room, Kid Barringer and Lon Prendergast admitted the adventurous burro to make her depredations there; but as Huldah insisted upon the boys replacing the viands, the joke proved more expensive than amusing.

It was on this back porch that a little party was gathered, one August evening, by special invitation. There was the entire family of the Wagon-Tire House, with Troy and Kid Barringer and his wife. The festival was mainly in honor of their return to Blowout, and Aunt Huldah had cooked a supper which was pronounced fit for a king.

After it they sat and talked, and Minnie Barringer asked, what almost no one in Blowout could have failed to know, "Why did you call it the Wagon-Tire House, Mrs. Sarvice? You called your other one the Wagon-Tire House, too, didn't you?"

Huldah smiled reminiscently.

"Yes, honey," she said. "It's what they've called every hotel or eatin'-house I've ever kep',



an' I've kep'—lemme see, one, two, an' Lone Gulch was three, an' the tent at Red Lake was four, an' the dugout was five—oh, I reckon I've kep' ten Wagon-Tire Houses, since I begun. You see, I was left—kinder sudden—with nothin' an' nobody.

"That's a sorter sad story, an' we ain't goin' to have any sad stories to-night; but they'd picked up the wheel of our wagon, 'way three mile down the crick, an' brung it to me. That wagon-wheel was all 'twas left me. I had gone to work cookin' fer a woman that was keepin' boarders, an' I set up that wagon-wheel by the front door, an' used to pound on the tire of it to call to meals. Seemed like it would sound louder ef I had the wheel a-loose from the tire, an' 'twas no manner of account by itself thataway, so I took the tire a-loose. It's the one that's hangin' right out there by the front door of this here house this minute."

"You've kept it all these years?" the lady from Georgia commented. "Why, Miz' Sarvice, I thought you said you didn't believe in keepin' relics."

"Well, I don't," Huldah returned promptly. "It ain't a relic; it's a wagon-tire—an' I use it in place of a dinner bell. Ef it made me cry to look at it," and she glanced sharply at Mrs. Patterson, "w'y, I wouldn't have it about. It means a



whole lot to me, that old wagon-tire does. I've beat it to call folks to my table when I had much to give 'em, an' when I had little to give 'em. It's stood before some mighty quare places, an' it's called in some mighty quare folks. I've pounded on it when my heart was light, an' occasionally when my heart was awful heavy—an' when 'twas heaviest I pounded loudest, an' sung a little to help out the noise."

"Didn't you keep the hotel at Mobeetie, Aunt Huldy, in seventy-nine?" Troy asked.

"I did so," Huldah replied. "That there place at Mobeetie was a picket house."

She turned to Daisy to explain.

"A picket house is sorter like a Mexican *jacal;* it's jest poles driv' in the ground, clost together, an' chinked, fer a wall; the dirt fer a floor; an' a roof put over of some sort." Then she resumed, speaking to the whole tableful: "We was put to it in them days to git anything to make doors out of. My front door at Mobeetie was a frame with a cow-skin stretched over it. I didn't have but three rooms, an' I couldn't be sure what I'd have to feed the folks; but that was the Wagon-Tire House at Mobeetie, and the wagon-tire stood in front of that there cow-skin door an' was pounded on three times a day."



There fell a little silence which Troy Gilbert broke, saying:

"Aunt Huldy, do you mind the first night I ever saw you?"

Huldah Sarvice had taken so many boys into her care, mothered them for a time, and given them back to life, steadied and comforted and strengthened—the procession of these boys of Huldah's was so long that the memories became a trifle jumbled.

She shook her head smilingly.

"I'd have to study a bit," she said. "'Twasn't in Blowout. Was you at Emerald, Gib, when they started the town, an' I was livin' there in a dugout?"

"No, it was at Capitan," Gilbert replied. "I got there when you were moving into the plank hotel."

Huldah smote her knee and chuckled.

"That there plank hotel!" she exclaimed. "I believe it's the only plank house I've lived in since I left Alabama. They ain't much account, these here plank houses ain't. I didn't have nothin' to do that house off into rooms with but cheese-cloth. I sewed the breadths together on my machine, an—w'y, Gib, you he'ped me tack up part of it, didn't you?"



"I sure did," Troy replied. "I was about fourteen, and the homesickest boy that ever found he'd made a big mistake when he ran away. Aunt Huldy, she just took me in and made me one of the family. I never will forget climbing up on the table to tack that cheese-cloth along the ceiling, while Aunt Huldy held the tacks and the hammer, and told me when it was straight."

"I was the only woman in Capitan fer quite a spell," Huldah said. "The boys was all nice and kind, and good to me; but I did git to wantin' to see somethin' that wore skirts long before I did."

"My goodness, Miz' Sarvice, you're a wonder to me," the lady from Georgia drawled gently. "I should think you'd 'a' been scared. I'll bet lots of them men was no better than they ort to have been."

Huldah laughed, a long mellow peal.

"No better than they ort to have been!" she echoed. "I'll bet they warn't. All of *us* is a *lot* better than we ort to be—now, ain't we? I've seen so much of these here men 'at gits such turrible names, an' I've found 'em so little like what I've been led to think, that I don't believe I could be skeered of any brother or sister that God ever made fer me."

"Well, of course," deprecated the lady from



Georgia, "I feel, too, that all God's creatures is brothers and sisters—when they behave theirselves like it. But when a man is so mean—"

She broke off, and sat mutely regarding some crumbs upon the table-cloth, which she arranged and rearranged with nervous fingers.

"Honey," came Huldah's deep voice, "I've had them awful fellers to lay sick in my house; I've 'tended on 'em an' talked to 'em; I've had sevcral that was brought to the Wagon-Tire House bad hurt, to die there. The Lord knows, they seemed simple-minded enough; an' ef they had anything bad about 'em, 'twas jest like pore little chil'en that hadn't been well taught, an' didn't know no better."

Those about the table were very still. Aunt Huldah's voice took up the theme:

"I mind Bige Kervis; they made up a big posse and captured him. He was a regular robber, an' had the name o' doin' some turrible things. W'y, that boy wasn't but nineteen years old—a child—I've seen my youngest brother, Ben, set on maw's lap after he was nineteen!—an' pore Bige, he talked to me like it was a new idee fer him to think that there was sech a thing as right and wrong. The day he died, there was somethin' goin' on in the town, an' he ast me would I prop him up at the window so's't he



could see the folks a-goin' by. Some chil'en come past, all tossed off mighty fine; they was the little Barnard chil'en, belonged to some rich ranch people out north o' Capitan; an' he says, jest as pleased, 'Don't they look pretty? I'd like to have 'em come in an' speak to me—ef their ma wouldn't keer.'

"Do you think that woman would do it? She seemed to think pore Bige's wickedness was ketchin', an' she hustled them little things a-past like he had smallpox."

"Did he repent?" inquired the lady from Georgia.

Huldah's eyes rested on her for a moment; then she responded:

"I never ast him wasn't he sorry; I thought it was pretty late to be talkin' 'bout repentance; but he up an' spoke of his own accord, an' said to me that he was—he was sorry plumb through. Said he'd started in with the idee that it was pretty smart to do as he'd been a-doin', an' that it took a feller of grit. Said he'd fixed it in his own mind that all the rest of the boys would do so ef they wasn't skeered. But now he'd come to see that there was no good in it, an' I believe that ef that boy could 'a' lived he'd 'a' done better."

"Of course you do, Aunt Huldah," Daisy agreed softly, taking the elder woman's hand



and smoothing it between her two small white ones. "You always believe so much good of people that they're ashamed not to come partly up to what you expect."

This ethical discussion proved insupportably dull to Gess and Tell.

"Aunt Huldy, tell us 'bout the time you-all's sheep got shot into," they demanded.

"That was on our way up here," Huldah indulgently responded. "Trace, my husband, he bought a little bunch of sheep in Menard County. They was jest beginnin' on sheep in Texas, an' they's been many a big fortune made on sheep there, all around San Antone, an' west and south of it, since then. Well, Trace, he was a good business man, an' he thort he'd bring a bunch o' sheep up this way. The cattle men—wherever sheep hadn't yet been brung in—was all up in arms about it, said the sheep ruined the pasture fer cows, an' that no cow wouldn't graze over the ground that a sheep had been on, till grass riz ag'in. When we struck the edge of the Panhandle country, they begun to threaten us considerable.

"We was waked up one night by the sound of firin'. Trace run right in the direction of the noise. He didn't know what fear was, Trace didn't. It was down among the sheep that we



heerd the guns, an' I was tryin' to git the two chil'en quiet, thinkin' I'd better foller him, when he come a-staggerin' in—shot."

There was a murmur of sympathy and reprehension from Huldah's listeners, and the lady from Georgia was heard to suggest something about "murderers".

"I don't reckon them fellers meant to shoot Trace, much less kill him; they was jest intendin' to shoot a sheep or two, an' discourage us from goin' further. But he run in among 'em in the dark, an' got a bullet through his shoulder; an' he bled till he could hardly git back to camp.

"Well, I won't never fergit that night—not if I live to be a hundred years old, and spend my days servin' in the United States cavalry, I reckon I wouldn't have no time so lively that it would make me fergit it.

"Trace was always flighty in his head, jest as soon as he got the least bit sick; an' he kep' a-p'intin' round at the dark an' a-hollerin', 'They're a-comin'—they're a-comin'! Somebody hide Huldy—somebody hide the babies!' till he got me right skeered. I dressed his shoulder; he wasn't much hurt 'ceptin' the loss o' blood; an' I set by him an' fanned him an' give him water, to keep the fever down.

"I'll bet you-all would have laughed to see me



gittin' that tent down in the mornin', an' gittin' them pack-mules loaded, an' gittin' them sheep bunched up, all with the two babies a-runnin' under my feet tryin' to he'p, an' Trace callin' fer a drink every minute or two."

"Well, I don't see any fun in it," objected Gess loyally; and Tell supplemented, "I jest wish't we'd 'a' been there."

"That's right, honey," smiled Aunt Huldah. "Well, I certainly did fix a funny contraption to carry Trace on. He couldn't walk, an' he couldn't ride his pony. I took them two tent poles, and laid 'em on each side o' the blanket that he was a-layin' on, turned the blanket edges over the poles and whipped 'em down with a sail needle an' twine that we had along fer tent mendin'. Then I rigged the ends of the poles to the saddle girt of the quietest pony we had. You've no idee how easy a hammock-contraption like that'll travel in a level country. Ef it hadn't been that I had the pack-mule, an' the other pony, an' the two chil'en, an' the sheep, we'd a got along splendid."

"I should think so!" laughed Troy Gilbert, and the others smiled, too. "And then there's a difference in different folks's idea of what getting along splendid is like," he added.



Again they laughed, and Huldah smiled with them.

"Well, we did as 'twas, but we went a little slow," she said. "Trace had traded the wagon fer part o' them sheep; an' after I'd druv 'em fer some time I got a chance to trade back, an' git us a wagon—the very wagon that there wagon-tire come off of."



CHAPTER XVIII

A CALL IN THE NIGHT

"The day of the Lord so cometh
As a thief in the night."

One night about twelve o'clock, Huldah, always a light sleeper, was awakened by the sound of a pony ridden hard up to her door, where it was violently checked.

She heard the rider throw himself from the saddle, and the next moment he was knocking loudly on the front door. She had already risen, and catching up her old "circular", was quickly at the door, which she opened a little way; speaking through the narrow aperture, she asked in a quiet voice:

"What is it? Did you want me?"

"Is that Mrs. Sarvice?" a man's voice inquired. "This is Long Forbes—you know, the foreman out at Circle M C. Mr. Carter's dead—died suddenly in the night—I believe Mrs. Carter found him dead; and she's in an awful fix—an awful fix, Mrs. Sarvice. She's been screamin' every minute since for you—except when she sets like



a rock and jest gazes an' gazes at him. But most of the time she's a-screamin' for you."

"Fer me, Forbes—screamin' fer me?" asked Huldah in some surprise.

"Yes, for you. There's nobody there with her but my wife—and the cowpunchers from the bunk house—and she a-screamin', 'Aunt Huldy Sarvice, oh, send for Mrs. Sarvice! Send for Aunt Huldy! I must have her—I'll go crazy if I don't see her.' My wife's a sort of delicate little woman, you know, and she's nigh-about overslawed."

"I'll go, jest as quick as I can git my duds on, Long," said Huldah. "How will I—"

"I rode in—run the *pinto* every foot of the way—because it would be quicker. I come past Roach Porterman's, and told him to hitch up the best team he had and drive you out himself—he'll be at the door here in a few minutes, he said. You'll get out quicker than as if I'd brought a team—his horses will be fresh."

"What are you goin' to do?" asked Aunt Huldah.

"Goin' on to Emerald—gettin' a fresh pony from Porterman—to telegraph fer his brother, and a casket, and all the things that she wants."

Poor Aunt Huldah! There was never anything particular for her to wear.



"Ef you was to die suddent, an' they come to lay you out, Miz' Sarvice, I vow there wouldn't be a decent rag to put on you!" the lady from Georgia had declared, between irritation and pity; and there was truth in what she said.

Huldah's shawl was "the shawl", and its duties in life were scarcely less multifarious or less onerous than her own. It wrapped the baby; it went to school daily, covering Sissy from head to heels, and more often than not with little Ally snuggled beneath its warm folds, as well. She had a black silk dress; it might be more proper to say that there was in her keeping a black silk, aged and respectable, which was the dependence of all Aunt Huldah's neighbors and acquaintances for a genteel appearance in emergencies, such as funerals and sudden calls to distant sick-beds.

In the way of head-gear, Huldah usually caught up what came nearest, with cheerful disregard of its age and sex; so that it was quite as likely to be Romey's little peaked cap as Sissy's demure—not to say disconsolate—sunbonnet.

Now, she quietly waked Mrs. Patterson, then Sissy, and imparted the news briefly.

"I do wish to goodness I'd 'a' put that bonnet through that I was a-goin' to make you," lamented the lady from Georgia. "Wear mine, won't you?"



Aunt Huldah was hooking the black silk dress across the ample bosom that swelled above a heart as bountiful.

"Laws, honey, it makes me look like a pecker-wood—I do p'intedly look like I was sent fer an' couldn't come, when I git that narrer-contracted little thing on top o' my big, broad head—an' it suits you to a t-y-ty."

Sissy, to whom the pathetic, the terrible, the irrevocable, appealed irresistibly, was crying quietly, and searching through a bureau drawer, which was a small chaos within itself, for the mate to a black woolen glove.

"Ef here don't come Ally!" exclaimed Aunt Huldah, in a loud whisper. "Ally, honey, you little tike, run back to bed—that's a good child. You want to see? Well, set right down there on Aunt Huldy's bed, an' keep them little toes warm. What is it, Miz' Patterson? Aw, this'll do; I'm jest a-tackin' it."

And the next moment the lady from Georgia, with a sort of mild exasperation, drew from the older woman's hands the big needle and coarse white thread with which she was "tacking" a snag in the back part of the black silk skirt.

"You're mighty kind. I reckon I put too much depen'ence on its never bein' seen on a gallopin' hoss," smiled Huldah.



Roach Porterman drove up to the door and called out, "Ready, Aunt Huldy?" at the same moment that a little whining cry was heard from Romey's cot.

"Oh, my gracious! Let me out quick," whispered Aunt Huldah, with a half-rueful, half-laughing glance. "Ef that child gits to cryin' an' hangin' on to me, I'll not git away from this house to-night!"

"We'll make him all right, Aunt Huldy," put in Sissy, the little mother, reassuringly. "We'll git him all comforted up." And with a hasty kiss and some last whispered directions, Huldah was away beside Roach Porterman in the buckboard, the two good ponies traveling at a lope.

"Mighty sudden, ain't it?" said he, turning to give her a glance, as they left the outskirts of Blowout.

"Yes, I reckon it's sudden," Huldah agreed; "though you know they've been feelin' uneasy about his heart fer quite a spell."

They covered the five miles in half an hour. Arrived at the Circle M C, Huldah jumped down and hurried to the house, while Roach went to put up his horses.

Before she had opened the door she could hear Mrs. Carter's voice—terrified, shrill, yet hoarse and broken with exhaustion—in one of her



screaming outbursts. "Tut, tut!" said the visitor to herself, making that deprecating little sound with the tongue that means pity or reproof. Quickly opening the door she went in.

Huldah might have been counted an almost comic figure, clad as she was in the rusty black, hastily put on, ill-fitting, out of date, a little soiled plaid golf cap of Romey's riding on one ear, her crinkled gray hair, loosened by the wind, blowing about her weather-bleached face. But never could the most elegant and correct angel have been more welcome to any poor sufferer's eyes than was shabby Aunt Huldah to Leila Carter's.

"Mrs. Sarvice!" she screamed shrilly, "Aunt Huldah! Oh! oh! oh!" and she flung herself wildly upon the new-comer, clutching her arms about the elder woman's neck, sobbing.

"He's dead! Mace is dead! I wasn't fit to have him! Oh—oh! God just dragged him out of life, because I wasn't fit to have him—"

"Here—here—here!" came Aunt Huldah's strong, quiet tones. "Now, we've got to stop this —right straight—right straight, honey," and she unclenched, with gentle force, the hands at her neck, gathered the slender form in her powerful arms, and carried Mrs. Carter to a couch, where she laid her down.



The poor frenzied creature instantly made to spring erect. But Huldah's big gray eyes were upon her—those eyes so gentle, so laughing, so tender; those eyes now so compelling.

"Did you want me, my child?" she asked, holding the woman quiet with both hands.

"Oh, yes—oh, yes—oh, yes! I've been *crazy* to see you! I said if they didn't get you here, I'd—"

"Well, now, let me tell you, honey child: I've come, an' I'm a-goin' to stay an' do everything fer you, an' take keer of you, an' love you, an' talk to you—an' let you talk to me, jest all you want to. Yes, yes, I know that's a lot—you want to talk to me a whole lot; an' I'm goin' to stay an' listen to it all, an' he'p you—"

She paused, and with her eyes fixed strongly upon the other's eyes, added impressively: "I'm goin' to stay jest so long as you're a good girl, an' control yourself—"

"Oh, I can't—I can't—I can't—"

"Now—now—now," began Huldah.

"But I tell you, I can't! Oh, you don't know! I can't control myself—"

"Well, then, I'll jest have to go," and Huldah gently released the struggling hands and turned toward the door.

With a single movement, the frantic woman



leaped after her, and caught her almost fiercely by the shoulders.

"You're cruel—oh, you're cruel—cruel to me!" she said sobbingly.

"No, my child; it's you that's cruel to yourself. An' ef I can't help you—ef you won't let me—w'y, I don't want to stay an' see it, honey child. Ef you'll let me help you, I'm a-goin' to stay an' do it all. But ef you won't—" and again she turned with quiet finality toward the door.

The effect was what she had hoped.

"O Aunt Huldah, don't go away! I will—I will be good; only don't go and leave me!" whispered poor Leila Carter, for all the world as one of the elder woman's repentant naughty little children might say it.

And just as she might to one of them, Huldah murmured: "Tha-a-at's my good baby; tha-a-at's my dear little girl. Now Aunt Huldy will take keer of her."

She undressed the trembling, shuddering creature, rubbed her limbs, put hot things to the little cold feet; all the while talking, talking, talking to her in that soft, soothing tone we use toward a child whose nerves are beyond its control.



CHAPTER XIX

"SISSY"

"Asleep, awake, by night or day
The friends I seek are seeking me;
No wind can drive my bark astray,
Nor change the tide of destiny."

At the end of half an hour Mrs. Carter, white, exhausted, but quiet, lay looking up in her visitor's face, Huldah sitting beside her holding both her hands in one of her own, smoothing the hair back from her forehead, and saying:

"Yes, honey, you can tell me now. No, it ain't wrong. No, it ain't goin' to harm me—no, ner to harm you. Go on—ease your heart."

"I—we went to bed early, and I was sleepy—you know, Mrs. Sarvice—Aunt Huldah—I've been uneasy about him—"

There was a long pause; a little trembling ran over the quiet form, and the sunken eyes fastened themselves more strenuously on the elder woman's face. And Huldah's clasp tightened on the hands in her own. Her gaze never faltered from that of the other, and her face wore something that was almost a smile.



"And I'd lost—a lot of sleep; so I was sleepy, and I guess I went right to sleep. I seemed to myself to have just barely—just barely dozed a minute or two, when I woke up and listened a little while to find if he was asleep. I didn't hear him breathe; so then I thought, 'I'll call him, very gently—just whisper his name—so that if he's awake he'll answer me; but if he isn't, it won't wake him.' So I just whispered 'Mace—Mace.' O-o-o-oh!" moaned the spent, low voice.

"Cry, ef you want to, honey; you jest cry, ef you want to. Aunt Huldy'll hold you tight."

"No-o-o, no-o, I don't want to cry. I don't ever want to cry any more in my life. I'm only going to tell you, now. He didn't answer; and then I said, 'Mace, Mace, are you awake, dear?' And when he didn't answer that—I wasn't a bit afraid—not a bit—Aunt Huldah—I just reached my hand over and laid it on his face." Mrs. Carter's voice dropped to the lowest whisper. "And *it was cold!*"

"Yes, darlin'. You mustn't feel—you mustn't feel like he's had to bear anything that was cruel, or anything that was strange. You know you'll come a-trottin' right after him—it's jest a few days, like. He's a-goin' to carry on his affairs, all his joys an' his lessons an' everything—jest like he did here, only with a bet-



ter chance all the time—better luck—more wisdom—"

"Oh, Aunt Huldah, do you believe it—do you believe that?"

"Well, I should think I do!" came Huldah's warm, cheery tones. "I jest know it. An' you're a-goin' to come along, too, yourself, an' have all that same better chance an' more success an' more luck 'at he's got now. An' then you'll look back an' wonder what 'twas made you cry an' carry on so. An' you'll look it over and say, 'Whatever was it made me think I had to feel so dreadful about it, an' take on so?' An' you'll say, 'Well, it was jest *in* me. It was 'cause I didn't understand, couldn't see, ner realize.'"

"Mrs. Sarvice!" broke in the younger woman's voice, with something of the earlier fever and eagerness; "Aunt Huldah, I want to take Sissy—a child—the baby—to adopt, you know."

The elder woman made no response. She only looked narrowly at the face before her, and quietly patted the hand she held.

"That's why I wanted to see you so dreadfully, Mrs. Sarvice. You know I always said I couldn't take a child, or children, here into our home; because—"

She shrank a little, drew a long, sobbing breath, and went resolutely on.



"I said that Major Carter didn't like to be bothered, that he must have a quiet home, and children would worry him. God only knows what made me speak such lies."

"Oh, honey! You mustn't call yourself unkind names."

"Well, I won't, then. Maybe it isn't any good indication—I guess it isn't. But why should I want to tell such an untruth as that? Mace—when I lost my baby, and—and we knew we'd never have any more of our own—Mace always wanted me to adopt a child, half-a-dozen of them, he said."

Huldah uttered no word, but her face looked startled, surprised.

"Let me say it all—I'll never feel any better till I get it all out," protested the poor woman before her.

"I believe you're right, honey, an' I won't interfere ner say a word. You jest talk."

"What strange thing is it in the human heart —what makes us so perverse? He wanted a child—or children; he begged me to take them. But Aunt Huldah, that isn't near so strange as —as—about myself. I wanted the children, too. I wanted Sissy. You thought I wanted her for a servant, and I let you think it. Sissy thought so, too; and I was bitter and hurt and angry that



you suspected me of such a thing, and that Sissy shouldn't want to come to me, when I just loved her little plain face, and her little old-womanish ways. Aunt Huldah, she's the very image of the only little sister I ever had—little Agnes. She was nearly ten years younger than I, and she died when she was about the age Sissy was when I first saw her. I was in a perfect panic because Mace would rather have me take a boy; but that day—you know—"

"Yes, I know, honey."

"Well, that day Mace had said—we—we'd agreed to take them both, if you'd let me have them."

"Lord, Lord!" murmured Aunt Huldah. "Ef I'd 'a' had the least idee—"

"Of course you didn't!" put in the other. "How could you? I was just so hateful; how should you suppose I wanted Sissy to love and make a little sister—a daughter of; and that because Mace wanted the boy, and Sissy loved it—I thought that he—that I, too—would—"

Her voice sank into silence. Then lifting her head she murmured feverishly, "But I'll make it right, now. I'll—"

"Law, honey, don't take a child in that spirit—as a sort of punishment," put in Aunt Huldah.

"But it isn't punishment!" cried Mrs. Carter,



passionately. "It's the only thing in the world I want. If you won't let me have her—if you won't let me have Sissy—I'll have to go back and try to live with mother and brother Philip and the rest of them. But I don't want to. I'd rather stay here and go on with Mace's ranch, and the things he was interested in, if I could have Narcissa, and you'd—you'd help me out sometimes, and cheer me up. Do you suppose she'd come?" the strained eager voice suddenly inquired. "*She* thinks I want to make a servant of her, too, doesn't she? But if she thought I loved her—"

"Oh, she'll come, honey. You'll see; Narcissy 'll come. They never was a little soul more hungry fer love, ner one that needed pettin' and sp'ilin' an' dressin' up—w'y, Miz' Carter, that child jest needs to be made fairly frivolous! She's too solemn, too old-headed. Her little heart's plumb full an' runnin' over with love an' kindness; only her nature's a little turned to be sad; it wants a whole lot of bakin' powder stirred into it; an' it'll be jest the thing fer you to have to do. Sure, you shall have Sissy—an' the baby, too—ef—ef we can fix it that way"—the brave heart choked down a sob that rose—"and I guess we kin, fer he's strong an' hearty; he's done cut eight teeth, an' Sissy has allus had a heap o' keer of him."

Aunt Huldah stayed at the Circle M C ranch



for three days. The poor, shattered, disorganized household rallied about her strong, poised, comfortable personality as little children flock to the one adult, in the presence of danger or distress. She saw them through the funeral, with all its strain and its heart-breaking details. Long Forbes' little frail wife seemed to draw strength from the very sound of Aunt Huldah's heartsome voice, the light and cheer and strength of her presence. At the end of that time she went back to the Wagon-Tire House, promising to return the next day but one, and to send or bring Sissy if she could get her ready.

This proviso, in reality, covered a different possibility from the one indicated.

"You can't always tell," Huldah murmured to herself as she drove back across the open plain to Blowout; "but I think—yes, I b'lieve I know jest how to work it on Sissy.'"

The result proved that she had not boasted vainly. When Mrs. Patterson, Gess and Tell, Romey and Daisy—and Sissy with the baby in her arms—gathered around Aunt Huldah to hear "all about it", she began her secret campaign against Sissy's heart. She described the desolate, frantic creature she had found at the Circle M C, recounted their long talks, explaining how bitterly lonely Mrs. Carter was, how



loving, how she longed for some one of her own to love.

"An' she had a little baby of her own—an' it died? Did ye say that, Aunt Huldy?" questioned Sissy, wiping away her tears with the baby's tiny skirt, while he looked earnestly in his little foster-mother's face, then at the others inquiringly, and his baby lips quivered.

"Yes, Sissy, that's what I said," answered Huldah.

"And she ain't hateful, nor proud, nor stuck up?" queried Mrs. Patterson, in bewilderment.

"No, she ain't none o' them; jest heart-broken an' lonely. She says, Sissy, that you're the livin' image o' her little sister—the only little sister she ever had, an' 'at died when she was jest your age. Wouldn't ye like to go out an' stay with her, fer a spell? Ye see, Aunt Huldy can't go back—not right away; an' the pore thing is that lonesome—"

"Oh, yes, Aunt Huldy!" cried Sissy, eagerly. "Oh, I'd jest love to go! Only—only—the baby—"

Sissy's meek heart was torn. Here was the first person who, in all her little life, had needed her; a grand lady, beautiful and rich, but whose heart and hearth were desolate, who said that she—



she, Sissy—was like a little sister; who needed her ministrations; but there was the baby, our baby—

Sissy's eyes looked piteously at Aunt Huldah. It was the psychological moment.

"I don't know but ye might take the baby with ye fer a little spell—jest fer a little spell," debated Aunt Huldah in a quiet, almost argumentative tone. She had, indeed, known "jest how to work it on Sissy."

That very afternoon, Narcissa sat beside Long Forbes upon the buckboard seat, the baby in her arms, her own slender wardrobe and his little things in a fat bundle at their feet; and the child's motherly heart was almost bursting at thought of what she could do for the rich, beautiful, bereaved lady, who had said that Sissy was the living image of her little sister.

This was the most marvelous thing that had ever come into Narcissa's life. She brooded upon that statement; she turned it over and over, and examined it in every possible light that her child's mind could bring to bear upon it.

Mrs. Carter's little sister—she looked just like Mrs. Carter's little sister. How, then, was she ever again to think of herself as ugly—pitifully ugly—and common-looking?

This one idea, with which the child's soul was



grappling—had grappled from the moment it had come into her knowledge—this one idea was to be the lever which should lift her drooping nature up into the light.

And when, a week later, Aunt Huldah, with Daisy, was spending the day at the Circle M C, she gazed with eyes of astonishment at the new Narcissa who came running out to meet her. All day she watched her furtively, this child whose face was constantly full of smiles, alternating with looks of tender solicitude for her benefactress; who seemed never to walk now, much less to go drooping about, but to move on light, swift feet; whose hair, drawn softly up on her head and disposed with a knot of delicate ribbon, was so becoming to her unformed, angular-featured, though sweet and candid face; this Narcissa whose daintily-made, carefully-fitted dress of fine, tasteful material, so transformed her figure and carriage, just as her pretty slippers and stockings seemed to give her another step.

"I love the ground she walks on!" whispered the child in her old friend's ear, clutching Aunt Huldah's hand with both of hers, when they had retired to a bedroom to lay off the elder woman's wraps. "I—I—I'd—want to die for her, if there was to be any reason. Oh, she's the sweetest thing! I could fairly lay down and ast her to



walk over mè! Ain't she jest lovely in crape? Me an' her an' the baby—"

Sissy paused abruptly, so abruptly that Aunt Huldah glanced at her in surprise.

"She—and the baby—and—and I," she brought out slowly and laboriously; already this mind, which had been so long only half-awake, was roused and turning eagerly to the fountain of love and of knowledge; "we're a-goin'—I mean, we are going—to San Antonio next week to see the dentist 'bout one of her teeth 'at's been achin'. And while we're there she's goin' to have our pictures took—or—or, taken, to send back to her folks. She says her ma will just think it's a picture of little Agnes—my picture, I mean." And Narcissa choked with the love and pathos of it all.

It was a proof of how children and all subjective creatures instinctively trusted Huldah Sarvice's boundless benevolence, that Sissy poured out all this tumbling flood of devotion and admiration for the new home and the new protector, without once saying, "But I love you, too." Her love for Aunt Huldah was one of the underlying facts of the universe, which needed no explanation, no bolstering, no assurances.

This trust was instinctive, and never formulated for an instant. Huldah would have found



it strange to see the child consider that phase of the subject. She looked down at the peaked, freckled little face (on which, by the way, the freckles were fading very fast) and answered heartily, with her hand on the child's shoulder:

"Jest the best gal 'at ever was—that's what you air, Narcissy. Can't nobody go through this world givin' out so much as you do, without gittin' it back ag'in. Miz' Carter, she's jest bound to love anybody 'at loves her so much."



CHAPTER XX

LONE DEATHERAGE

"Now, therefore, I pray thee, take heed to thyself until the morning, and abide in a secret place, and hide thyself."

It was a week or so after Sissy's departure for the Circle M C with the baby.

Throughout the night there had been a gusty wind abroad, not the steady, sweeping plains wind, but a restless, distempered thing. It chafed the wagon-tire against the adobe wall, drawing from it whispered sounds, like shades of its merry daytime clangor, as though it called weird hosts to ghostly banquets.

But as the night waned, this wind fell silent; and in a still, mystic hour before the dawn, when life seemed to pause expectant, and all those little noises of the unquiet night were hushed, in an hour of mute waking, when creation itself appeared to hesitate as though asking a sign, there came a low timid tapping on Huldah's window.

She was awake instantly, and on the alert; all her faculties not only fully aroused, but actively at work. She realized in a flash that this was



some one who knew her and the ways of the house; some one who came unerringly to this one window to rouse nobody else in all the place, but just to call her. The cautiously guarded sound said, as plainly as words could have done: *There is trouble—there is terror—I am come to you for help!* And its rapidity, its importunity, explained as clearly: *The need is pressing—it is life or death—come quickly—quickly!*

By the time an ordinary clumsy being would have wakened and begun to wonder what the disturbance was, Huldah Sarvice was out of bed, had wrapped about her the first garment that came to hand, and was at the window, skilfully unfastening it, having first tapped gently upon it to signify that she had heard.

With a groan of protest, the rude sash was dragged ajar; Huldah put her face to the aperture and murmured, "Who is it? What do you want?"

"It's me—Aunt Huldy—it's me—Lone Deatherage," came the reply, in a whisper broken by gasps. "They're after me—I've been ridin' more than four hours. Come—come to the door—quick!—and let me in. I'll—I'll tell you all about it."

"The kitchen door, Lone—I'll let you in there. It's the only place we'd be alone in—the only



place where we could talk." With hasty hands she put on a wrapper, and, taking up her little brass lamp, crept with it unlighted across to the kitchen, unlocked its door—about the only door in the whole Wagon-Tire House provided with a lock—and the exhausted man waiting outside stumbled in.

Huldah closed and locked the door again, then quickly lighted her lamp and turned to him.

"What's the matter, Lone?" she began; then broke off. "Set down, child. Here," and she thrust him into a chair.

"They're after me, Aunt Huldah; some fellows from Emerald. I'm not guilty—but it looks that way to them. If they get their hands on me, they're not going to stop to ask any questions. They've got a rope—it's the first tree, with them. There's nobody on earth but you, I know, that would believe me. Can you—"

Huldah had come close to Deatherage. Now she leaned down to him, and with her eyes looking into his eyes, put her hand on his shoulder.

"But, Lone, what is it, boy? I reckon you were drinkin'—was that it?"

"Yes, of course, I was drinkin'—it's always that—but I wasn't guilty of what they think. This thing's lynchin', an' I know you don't think that's right—"



"No, Lone, I don't hold with lynchin'; an' I believe you're not guilty, when you give me you're word that you're not. But I reckon you'll have to tell me what 'tis they *say* you done. What is it?"

"I—I'd rather— You know, the stage was held up last week over beyond Emerald?"

Huldah nodded, her eyes upon his eyes.

"Well, this evening, at Emerald—that is, last evening—Dutch John came to me—he's a kind-hearted fellow, and he thinks—like you, Aunt Huldy—that I'm an innocent man—he came to me, terribly scared, and warned me that there was a great crowd over in Thacker's supply store; the sheriff was with them, carrying on and drinking (Crowder is a hard drinker) and getting ready to lynch me."

"What for, Lone? What did they say you'd done?" inquired Huldah's low voice.

Deatherage looked distressed.

"It was a pocketbook I had—the Mexican chambermaid at Mrs. Humphrey's boarding-house—you know, the Cowboys' Home—she told some Mexican that she saw it under my pillow that morning—"

"An' did she? Did you have it?"

"Yes, I had it. Yes, it was one of the things taken from the stage by those that robbed it."



"Where'd you git the pocketbook, Lone?"

"Well, there's the trouble, Aunt Huldy. Of course, there ain't a livin' soul in this country that's a-goin' to believe fer one minute that I'm innocent—unless you will."

Lone's pale face with its sad eyes leaned still farther forward toward the woman.

"Will you?" he said finally.

Huldah drew a long breath, and her gaze never left his face.

"Yes—yes, Lone, I will," she answered.

The man's lips twitched. Tears rose in his eyes; he swallowed convulsively.

"But I guess you'll have to tell me—" Huldah began.

"Aunt Huldy, he's just a boy—a spoiled boy—foolish; I reckon he's some bad, too; but mostly he got into bad company. And his folks—why, they're good people. I've got to save his neck—if I can; and get him sent back to—" he paused with a jerk, "get him sent back to his folks," he finished confusedly.

"An' you say they're after you?—how close, Lone?"

"They rode out of Emerald not more than twenty minutes after I did," answered the man. "Dutch John had brought me a good fresh horse—I cut across at Twelve Mile—I saw that they



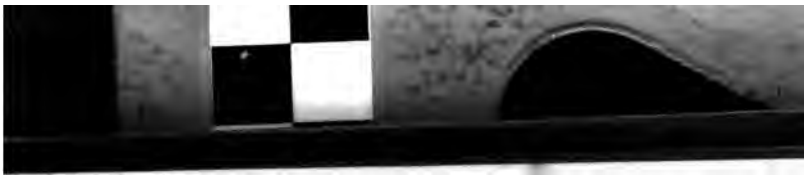
went round by the Sand Draw, to go to my ranch, you know—and I gained nearly half an hour on them there. If you can do anything for me—if you know anything to do—I reckon you've got to do it quick, Aunt Huldy." And again Lone's eyes searched the face of his only friend.

But Deatherage was not so greatly to be pitied, since Huldah Sarvice might well be reckoned a friend worth a host of the ordinary metal. Now she rose with the air of one who has found a way. Extinguishing her lamp, she went to the back door, unlocked it, drew it open and looked out.

"Day's a-comin'," she said briefly. "There's jest one thing to do, Lone; gimme your hat,"—and she put the big sombrero out of sight behind boxes of provisions. Then she stepped to a corner where some garments were hanging from nails. Hastily taking down certain of these, she brought them to Deatherage.

"Old Sairey, she's gone to see her sick daughter. It's the only chance in the world," she said quietly. "Here," and she put a calico skirt over his head, fastened it, then added a calico sack of another color, which covered him to below the waist, put a faded soiled silk handkerchief around his neck; and finally, placed upon his head a common slat sunbonnet.

"She wears it night an' day—the chil'en vow



she sleeps in it—so you kin jest keep it thar'," she said. "I'm a-goin' to make a fire in the cook-stove; it's mighty near the usual time fer a fire. You set there—no, here—this way—a little more to this side; there, that'll do,"—and she examined the figure in the chair critically, first from the door, then from the window, finally going outside and looking in through the window.

"Yes, you're all right," she said cheerily. "You look exactly like old Sairey—I don't believe you're a bit taller—an' she never says a word from mornin' till night; lots o' folks thinks she's deef an' dumb."

"What shall I do, Aunt Huldy? It's awful to sit still—and—"

"Yes, honey, I know it is," agreed Huldah, kindly, patting the shoulder covered by the faded calico sack. "But I'll fix you somethin' to do; the minute I hear 'em comin' I'll give you a pan o' 'taters an' a knife, an' you can peel 'em—don't be skeered o' your hands; they ain't no bigger'n old Sairey's."

The fire was burning, the kettle boiling; Aunt Huldah had laid out flour, water, lard and the big biscuit board; the east was just beginning to lighten; in the distance a muffled sound began to grow, the sound of horses' hoofs.

The party rode straight down Comanche Street



to the Wagon-Tire House—plainly, they knew their destination. They first pulled up in front of the place; then one man moved round to the back, whence they saw smoke ascending, and returning held brief counsel with the leader, whereupon the whole party turned their horses' heads and drew to the kitchen door. The leader and several others dismounted, and came and stood in the doorway.

Huldah, her hands in the flour, turned and looked at them quietly.

"Good mornin', gentlemen," she said cheerily and smilingly.

They seemed a little disquieted at their reception.

"Good—we—we want Lone Deatherage," responded the one who seemed to be in command. He spoke with the air of a man who is not to be tricked or turned aside from his purpose—who will, rather than this, summarily sacrifice the amenities. "He was mixed up in that there stage robbery," this peremptory individual continued in a sort of aggressive tone. "We rode round past his ranch, and searched it—he wasn't there; an' we're told that he's likely to come straight here. We're told that you harbor him—"

"I harbor—as you call it—a heap o' people," Huldah's quiet voice made answer. "This is a



Huldah, her hands in the flour, turned and looked at them quietly. [Page 240]





hotel, ye see. I'd harbor any of you gentlemen that come an' ast decent fer a room—"

"Then did he come and 'ask decent fer a room'? Do you mean that?"

"No, he didn't. I don't reckon you want to take my word, though, ef you think I befriend him. Lone Deatherage wasn't in any o' my rooms last night when I went to bed. But most of 'em ain't got no locks to 'em; I don't allus know who's in my own house—ever' room a-openin' onto the street, like it does. S'arch. I reckon that's what ye come fer—s'arch. You may find some o' my boarders kind o' short-tempered, ef ye pull 'em out o' bed at daylight and ast 'em air they Lone Deatherage; but I s'pose you're the sheriff?"

"Yes *ma'am!* I'm the sheriff o' Hardegger County," declared he of the uncompromising front.

"An' I reckon you kin take keer o' yourself. I ain't goin' to lift a finger to hinder you. Thar's the house; jest leave me an'," she hesitated imperceptibly, "an' her," she nodded slightly toward the figure which sat peeling potato after potato and dropping them into the pan of water—"to git breakfast fer my boarders—time you're done s'archin' fer Lone Deatherage."

Leaving one of their number in the back yard holding all the ponies, the men from Emerald



trooped noisily into the Wagon-Tire House. They went from room to room, searching, examining, inquiring. Those who pulled the blankets down off Lon Prendergast's ears came very near receiving the contents of Lon's six-shooter as a check to crudely expressed curiosity. They had more than one sharp altercation; and from one room there came the sounds of a considerable scuffle.

Meantime, the strain in the kitchen was terrible.

"Aunt Huldy," whispered Lone, "God send that they don't stay too long—the potatoes—"

He felt Huldah's grip upon his shoulder, as she brushed past him seemingly intent upon the rolling-pin; and the next instant a man's face showed at the window. They were watched.

Once, during the search, one of the Emerald men, putting his head in at the kitchen door, called: "Say—you old woman, there! Come an' git us a—"

Huldah stepped, in the most natural manner, toward the man, bringing her figure between him and Lone.

"She's nigh about deef an' dumb," she observed. "Anything I can do?"

"Oh, no, I reckon not; jest tell us where the—"



Upon the instant, there was a shout from Comanche Street. The men ran to the front door and found a party that had ridden direct from Emerald.

"Hey, Cap!" shouted the leader of this party. "We've got the—"

"Sssh!" cut in the sheriff; and thereafter they talked for some moments in lowered tones. Then the first party hallooed to the man in the back yard to bring their ponies around; and when he did so, mounted hastily, and all rode away together without another word.

Signing to Lone to sit just as he was and continue quietly with his work, Huldah went into the family sleeping-room. Here she found Mrs. Patterson, Daisy and the children cowering in a forlorn little group, silent and terrified.

"What is it, Aunt Huldy?" whispered Gess.

"Nothing at all!" cried Huldah, in loud cheery tones; "not a thing in the world to be skeered about;" and she threw open the window and bustled noisily about the room. As its frightened inmates began to move, to separate and draw toward her, she turned and explained.

"It was the sheriff from Emerald, with a posse —I reckon it was a posse—a-huntin' fer—some feller that had been mixed into that stage hold-up last week. Not a thing in the world to do with



us, chil'en—needn't to be skeered a bit; they're gone now, anyhow. Wash an' dress; an' as soon as Aunt Huldy gits the breakfast all started, she'll be in fer prayers."

All day Lone Deatherage sat or lay in a tiny room Huldah called her own, which opened off the kitchen, visited as often as she dared by Huldah herself, who fed, and cheered, and sustained the poor fellow's courage. When the lady from Georgia learned, during the day, who it was the party had been searching for, she said to her friend:

"You see now what that poor, mis'able, good-fer-nothin' drunkard has done fer you. He—"

"Laws, Miz' Patterson!" broke in Huldah, pushing the lady by the shoulder, and with a curious look in her face—a look so strange that it instantly arrested the other's attention. "Laws, Miz' Patterson, you hush—jest hush!"

And Mrs. Patterson hushed, and remained so, her eyes following Huldah about with a startled, apprehensive, mystified expression.

At noon, when all the other boarders had departed, Troy Gilbert, lingering a little at the table as of custom, glanced once or twice obliquely at his hostess.

"Well, out with it, Gib. Reckon ye ain't got bashful all of a sudden, have ye?"



He still hesitated a moment, then—

"It sounds like 'I told you so,' to say it; but you know, 'Aunt Huldy, this is about what I expected Lone Deatherage would bring you—"

"What's he brought me, Gib?"

"Well, disgrace—"

"Oh, law—disgrace!" repeated Huldah, and she laughed softly. "I can jest bear a heap o' disgrace, Gilbert. It's a turrible big bugaboo thing they use to skeer people with—disgrace. But do you know, I think it's sorter healthy. I've seed some folks that would be pretty good people ef they jest had a great big dose o' disgrace."

"Why, Aunt Huldy, what in the world do you mean? Disgrace is the one thing—"

"Thar' you go, Gib. That's the regular old tune! Folks is taught to be brave about everything else in the world—but disgrace. They're taught that it's a virtue to be plumb sneakin' cowards about it. 'An' what is disgrace, Gib—what is it?"

"Well, it's to be ruined in the eyes of—"

"In the eyes o' who? Of a lot o' people 'at don't know what they're a-talkin' about—an' don't *want* to know, Troy—don't *want* to know. Disgrace—the kind o' disgrace that you're a-speakin' of—is jest breath—*breath!* I reckon 'at when the Man o' Sorrows was walkin',



amongst folks here on earth, He was pretty much all the time in this here disgrace you're a-speakin' of. 'Pears to me I remember 'at He kep' bad company—as bad company as I've kep'. He wasn't noticed at all, 'mongst the best folks. I reckon what was His portion—what He et an' drunk all His days, Huldy Sarvice can afford to take a little snack of, once in a while. Oh, law, disgrace!" she murmured to herself again, and again laughed softly, shaking her head.

CHAPTER XXI

THE LADY FROM GEORGIA FINDS HER HUSBAND

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend."

About three o'clock of this trying day, Pet Moran came running into the Wagon-Tire House, crying out that her mother was very bad, and would Aunt Huldy come quick.

"What's the matter with her, honey? Has she got one of her spells?" questioned Huldah. "Can't they git Miz' Rackstraw? Looks like she kin manage them spells, if anything, better'n I kin."

The child looked in astonishment at Aunt Huldah—Aunt Huldah Sarvice who had never been known to debate, much less refuse, in an emergency of this sort.

"Yes, it's one of her spells, but she's the worst she's ever been—sister Mary says for you to come *quick!*" And the messenger backed up her request by bursting into violent weeping.

"Well, run along, honey, an' tell sis' Mary I'll be there jest as quick as I kin come."



Daisy and Mrs. Patterson, with the three children, were at school; they would not be home till after four—possibly not till five if, as often happened, the teacher was detained with school work, and Daisy kept the children there for the sake of relieving Huldah. The boarders would not be in for their supper till six. All was quiet about the house. She had carried a nice dinner to Lone, and provided him with some books, magazines and pictures; and when she took a peep at him she found him sleeping.

"Pore feller! I reckon he needs it, after all the strain and pull and haul and misery!"

As she stood hesitating, he opened his eyes and started up.

"What is it?" he asked with a nervous catch. "Anything—"

"Not a thing in the world, Lone; you jest make yourself comfortable. I've got to go an' see Miz' Moran, I reckon—I reckon I'm plumb 'bleeged to go. They sent Pet a-runnin' to say she's in one o' her spells—and the worst she's *ever* had. But," noting the alarm in the man's glance, "I ain't goin' to be long." She halted, hesitating, plainly in doubt. "What do you think, Lone? Ort I to leave you a gun? I dunno—"

"No, Aunt Huldy, you needn't leave me no gun. Ef I can't come out o' this thing with-



out blood on my hands—an' with a clean name, too, a little later on, when I can have a chance to clear my name—why, I won't come out at all."

"All right, Lone—all right, boy—I'm glad to hear ye speak that way. Now, don't you be nervous. I won't be a minute longer'n I have to be. I'll git Miz' Moran straightened up, an' come right back to you. I don't believe them fellers is likely to pester round the Wagon-Tire House any more—at least not any more to-day."

"Go on, Aunt Huldy. The sooner you go, the sooner I can hope to see you back," said poor Lone; and Huldah hurried away.

She found Mrs. Moran, as Pet had reported her, in a very bad seizure indeed. Mrs. Rackstraw—the resort of the afflicted when Aunt Huldah Sarvice was not to be had—had been sent for from a distant ranch, and would not be back for some days. Huldah girded herself for the fray; and for more than an hour life was pretty much all hot water, mustard plasters, ammonia, herb teas and the various other weapons of her accustomed arsenal.

More than once she emerged, in a momentary lull, from the heat of the conflict, and, startled to find how the time was flying, sent a messenger speeding here or there to summon some one to take her place. But of those sent for, several



were unattainable; and whoever else came, the terrified family still clung to Aunt Huldah Sarvice.

It was after four o'clock; the sufferer was comparatively easy for a moment, when Huldah's quick ear caught the sound of a rifle shot.

"Oh, my Lord!" she whispered beneath her breath. Dropping what she had in her hands, she cried out to Mary Moran:

"Mary, honey, you an' Miz' Faidley can 'tend to your ma now—she's a-doin' all right. I have to run home right quick—I'll—I'll see you-all ag'in to-night—or to-morrow." And she was gone, without hat or bonnet, hastening along the way almost at a run.

As she rounded the corner of Comanche Street, she saw what she had dreaded: a group of men and horses before her door! She dashed boldly into their midst, and at the very threshold attempted to thrust Crowder, the sheriff of Hardegger County, aside. As she came to the door, she saw within, Lone Deatherage, white, with blood upon his face and his hands, holding by the table, stumbling, going down to his knees, and then to his face, on the floor.

She turned upon the men, who were attempting to delay her.

"You git away from here now!" she said.



"You've done enough." She demanded of Crowder: "What right have you to come and shoot down a man that's had no trial—a man that may be innocent, for all you know—an' outside of your own county? You leave here now—you can't go too fast. *You let me go in!*"

The others had drawn together in perfectly evident disarray. The smell of whisky was strong on Crowder's breath. He was by no means comfortable himself, and he answered angrily:

"No, you can't go in there—'thout me. I didn't want to shoot him, the meddlin' fool! I didn't want to touch him—I told him so. I know he ain't guilty, Mrs. Sarvice. We know he's innocent—that he didn't have anything to do with the hold-up. But he's been a-harborin' the feller that did. I didn't want to shoot him," he returned to his grievance, as Huldah pulled her arm from his grasp. "The fool—the fool! He wouldn't stand aside when I told him to. Why didn't he stand aside when the of'cer of the law told him to?"

"Well, I think you've done enough here now. You've certainly got a plenty to answer fer—an' you'll be ast to answer," said Huldah, quietly. "Accordin' to your own say, you've killed a man you knowed was innocent, 'cause he didn't 'stan' aside' when you told him to. I'd leave now, if



I was you, jest as fast as I could go. And I'd thank them that came to mend the mischief I'd done."

"Well, I won't. I'm a-goin' to have—" began Crowder, when a shout was heard over in the little settlement back of the Wagon-Tire House, a cluster of tumble-down adobes, mostly tenanted by Mexicans and hard characters, euphoniously alluded to as Hog Town; and a man upon a sweating pony came into Comanche Street from that direction, waving his hat and shouting:

"Come on, Cap! That feller, he's got out the back way, an' off toward the El Moro trail—makin' fer the railroad!"

Without further parley, the men about Huldah Sarvice mounted and rode with the new-comer, while she ran into the house and stooped over Lone Deatherage.

At that moment Troy Gilbert, who had been away on official business, rode up and dismounted at the door. A crowd was collecting. As Gilbert entered, Huldah looked up from the prone figure, and said to him:

"Gib, if you'll jest see that the folks don't bother me, I'll be much obleeged. Old Sairey's in the kitchen; me an' her can 'tend to—to—I'd



ruther jest not be bothered. It's Lone Deatherage."

Gilbert stepped back and dispersed the curious group at the door.

"Yes, there's a man shot," he said briefly. "It's Lone Deatherage. Aunt Huldy's 'tending to him. She'd rather you'd move on now. Yes, 'twas Crowder, from Emerald."

He looked interrogatively over his shoulder, and turned back to say, with a note of incredulity in his voice:

"Aunt Huldy says Crowder wasn't after Deatherage—'twas a mistake. What? Yes, Crowder is running his man over toward El Moro. There they go, by George!"

This having more effectually dissipated the curiosity than anything else could, Gilbert went back to where Huldah knelt over the wounded man, trying to get to his hurts.

"I'd ruther have old Sairey—you call her," objected Huldah, as Troy attempted to help.

"No—no," pleaded Troy, abashed by the inference; "I'm sorry for him. I'm willing to own you were right to keep him. You say Crowder admitted he wasn't after him?"

Huldah nodded, adding:

"Said he knowed 'twas an innocent man he was shootin' at—them was Crowder's words—



but that Lone wouldn't git out o' the way when he told him to."

Gilbert whistled softly.

"Bad business for Crowder," he commented.

"Well, he'p me git him up onto a bed, Gib," Huldah sighed. "I've done all I can here, an' I can't stop the bleedin'. Call Sairey, now."

And the three carried the wounded man into the little room where Huldah had left him so short a time before. They undressed him, found that his wound was in the left shoulder, apparently through the upper part of the lung, and that he was bleeding terribly from it. The blood that Huldah had seen upon his face and hands had only been dabbled there from this wound.

Troy asked no more questions, but helped as deftly and efficiently as possible for a quarter of an hour. Then he said:

"I've got to go now, Aunt Huldy; I was on my way to answer an imperative call when I stopped."

"All right, Gib—I'm ever so much obleeged to you. There's nothin' more, anyhow, that you could do."

A few moments later they were alone; the patient opened his eyes and began immediately to speak.

"Aunt Huldah, how bad am I hurt?" he asked.



"I don't want to skeer ye, Lone," answered Huldah, gently, "but—I—" She was looking down at his hand, where the disfigured finger was unhidden—not turned in against the palm, as he usually carried it.

"You won't scare me—I don't care. I think I gave the boy time to get away. And now I don't care. I held the door. I couldn't let them get him. He's just a boy; and he's my—he's my—"

"That feller Crowder was after? He's your brother?" supplied Huldah, gently.

"No. He come from Georgia, where I used to live. He—his—his folks—Aunt Huldy, I couldn't let 'em get him on account of his—his folks. I held the door while he got away."

"I'm afraid you've give your life fer him, pore boy," Huldah muttered to herself. Again she looked at the disfigured hand.

"Lone!" she burst out, "I'm a-goin' to send for her—Miz' Patterson."

"You think I'm a-goin' to die, right away?" interrogated the man. "No, don't." In answer to her inquiry as to whether a bandage she placed was comfortable, he said, "Yes, that's right. It —no, ease that other one a little—it doesn't hurt much now. Feels sort of numb. Don't send for her. Don't bother her about me. I hoped, when



I was holding that door—but don't bother her now."

"Lone," urged Huldah, with sudden intuition, "that there boy you saved from Crowder's posse was her brother—"

"Yes," the wounded man agreed wearily; "it was Jimmy—it was her brother—Luceria's brother. He come not long after you left. He'd got to drinkin' over in Emerald, an' told the whole story—that's how they knowed I was innocent. I went out with him to the corral an' we got the brown KL pony—it's the best horse anywhere about here. An' then I got him something to eat—he was most starved. Crowder and his men came just as Jimmy was finishin'. I held the door so he could get off, out the back way an' 'cross to the El Moro trail."

"I'm a-goin' to send fer her, Lone. It ain't right—"

Lone shook his head.

"No," he said, "jest let me go quietly—she won't know me—I've changed a heap. She never saw me with a beard on my face. I've took a name she never heard. But let me tell ye, Aunt Huldy: that boy, he was a spoiled boy, an' he got into trouble a month or so back—in Georgia —an' he come out here to me—knew where I



was all the time—knew the name I went by. And I thought if I—"

A shadow fell across the threshold and looking up they saw the lady from Georgia.

Huldah rose with a startled exclamation, and went toward the door, intent on leaving husband and wife alone together. But the newcomer barely glanced toward the bed, and, drawing the mistress of the Wagon-Tire House into the next room, spoke hurriedly. She was shaking from head to foot, and her eyes were red.

"Miz' Sarvice," she began, "I just heard what happened to that pore man. I left Daisy and the children at Roach Porterman's, an' come along to ask could I do anything. I'm sorry for the way I've always spoke about him. Seems like I am always so hard on a drinkin' man. An' when Mr. Gilbert stopped by, an' told me how this man got hurt tryin' to shield another feller, and asked would I come home an' help you—why, I thought —Aunt Huldy, I ort not to be so hard on such a man. It's like it might be—might be—"

Huldah was pushing the trembling woman toward the threshold of that little room; now she urged her gently in and closed the door behind her.

Lone Deatherage had guessed wrong when



he said that his wife, Luceria Patterson, would never know him. As soon as her eyes fell upon his face, lying there white even against the white pillow, she cried in a strangled voice:

"Bob, oh Bob—oh, Bob! It's Bob!" and came creeping to kneel at his bedside.

For a long time there was silence between the two; then the woman began to speak, her face hidden, her voice broken by sobs. She was going on to accuse herself, to beg forgiveness,—and the Power that made her self-righteous knew what that cost her,—when the silence of the man upon the bed alarmed her. He had fainted.

Huldah rushed back in answer to the cry she uttered, to find her holding and chafing his hands, kissing and fondling the finger she had so contemptuously described in that bitter, unwomanly letter. Looking pitifully up into her friend's face, she questioned:

"What ails him, Aunt Huldy?"

"He's jest fainted from loss o' blood. I'll go—" began the elder woman.

"No, no," cried Mrs. Patterson, clutching Huldah's arm. "Oh, don't leave him!" And the swooning man, opening his eyes, signed with a feeble hand that she should stay.

And while Luceria Patterson knelt by that bedside, the tears rolling down her cheeks, Aunt Hul-



dah busily applying a hot-water jug to his feet, the wounded man told his story.

"'Twas Jimmy, Lucy," he said.

"What?" ejaculated the lady from Georgia, "Jimmy—here! Last I heard, he was in trouble at home."

"Well, he come out to me—he knew where I was all the time."

"How come?" she asked jealously.

"Well, when I wanted—when I wanted to go back," he said shamefacedly, "I wrote to Jimmy an' asked him; and he wrote me I'd better stay away, that you was very bitter against me—course I don't blame you, Luceria," he added hastily; and the lady from Georgia shook the tears from her face with a curious look of grief and indignation, but said never a word.

"He come out here, Lucy, an'—you know how Jimmy always was—'bout dime novels an' bad men an' sich; he went right straight into that sort of thing in Emerald."

He looked up into his wife's eyes humbly.

"Jest a child," he said; "didn't have no sense about these things."

The woman made an angry, contemptuous movement; and the man before her shrank and dropped his gaze from her face. Sighing, he said:



"Well, they's plenty of bad men in Emerald, and Jimmy he got right amongst 'em. They—I reckon they drew him into that stage-robbin' business—"

He broke off suddenly, the faintness returning.

"I got to be quick!" he gasped.

"Oh, Bob, don't talk at all," wailed the woman. "Don't let him talk, Aunt Huldy—it'll kill him."

"No, it won't," asserted Huldah, cheerfully. She looked hopefully at Mrs. Patterson's face; the mask of pride, of self-righteousness, had slipped from it.

"You talk to him an' keep him from talkin'," she amended kindly, as she went kitchenward for a pitcher of fresh water.

"Oh, yes, Lucy, please let me tell you—please," he murmured. "It's—it's all I've got in the world—just this that I want to tell you."

She made a movement of assent, and the weak voice went on:

"He oughtn't to 'a' give me the pocketbook—I don't know why he done it."

Again the woman made that impatient, contemptuous gesture; again the man shrank and lowered his eyes.

"Lucy, I thought if I could save Jimmy, if I could save his life, and bring him to you and



say, 'Here's Jimmy, Lucy, he was all mixed up in bad, dangerous things, but I've saved his life, and he's got his lesson, and he'll do better now—' I thought maybe if I could do that—"

He broke off and looked up into her face.

"Would it 'a' done any good, Lucy? Would it 'a' counted? Could you ever have forgive me, an' 'a' took me back, or put up with me after all I'd done—if I *hadn't* 'a' been killed—an' I reckon I am."

"Oh, Bob, dear!" sobbed the woman beside him; "what's Jimmy to me? A bad, selfish, disobedient boy! He don't care the rap o' his finger fer me—and it's mighty little I care fer him! And I love you, Bob—I always loved you —I reckon that's what made me so mean and bitter about you, when you—when you left me."

She had her arm under his head now; her face was down beside his pale face on the pillow, so that their words were whispered very low to each other. He turned his sad eyes upon her.

"Left you, Lucy? Me! Why, honey girl, I'd never 'a' left you on earth—"

"If I hadn't driven you away, Bob—yes, I know it now. But—ma, she—she was always hintin', an'—an' I heard they laughed an' said I'd held my head mighty high, to be deserted at

last. It drove me wild. An' I did love you, Bob —you don't know how I felt when I found you could pick up an' leave me that way."

"Aunt Huldy," called the injured man, as the elder woman came in. She was at his side in an instant. "Jimmy's got a good fresh horse—"

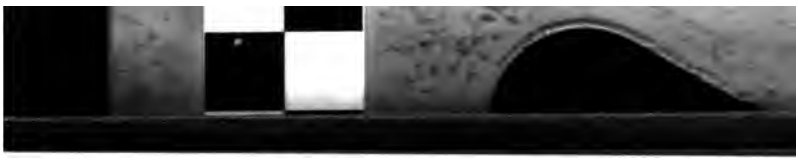
"Yes, Lone?" prompted Huldah.

"I—" he turned his eyes once more upon his wife's weeping face—"what's my chance? I don't want to die; seems most like Lucy 'll forgive me. I got Jimmy safe off. I was willin' to give my life fer his—it wasn't of much account, it seemed to me. But if Lucy cares—what's my chance, Aunt Huldy?"

The weeping wife drew Huldah down beside her. "Aunt Huldy," she said, "is he going to die? Does my Bob have to die? Have I got to give him up now—right now—jest when I've found him? How is he wounded—how bad is he hurt?"

Huldah rose softly, went round and laid her hand on Lone's forehead. She looked long in his face, then lifting his hand she held it in her own, noting the pulse. Laying the clothing back with gentle fingers she looked at the wound and its dressing.

"O' course I ain't a doctor," she said softly;



"but I've nursed a-many a wound—some less than this—and some worse."

The eyes of both the others were fixed implor-ingly upon her face.

"Some worse?" whispered the younger woman. "And could any of them—"

"Yes," replied Huldah, slowly. "I saw a fel-ler with a hurt like this—plumb through the up-per aidge o' the lung—McFall—I nursed him, an' I reckon he's a-livin' to-day." Then she added with her heartsome smile, glancing across at the poor wife:

"S'pose we jest take a-holt, an' don't *let* him die, Miz' Patterson? You'll be the nurse, and I'll be sorter roustabout, to wait on ye an' back ye up. I got the feelin' that he ain't goin' to go at all. In p'int o' fact, he's jest good an' ready to live—an' I believe he's *a-goin'* to live."

Fifteen minutes after, Huldah left her patient sleeping, his wife's hand held fast, his breath coming even and slow. Meeting Daisy and the three children in the kitchen doorway, she held up a warning finger.

"Step easy an' speak soft," she cautioned them. "Miz' Patterson's husband has come. He's—he's been hurt, an' she's a-nursin' him in there."

"Oh, an' me—me!" cried Ally. "Can't I fan



him when his feether is up? I can fan awful good! Mr. Deatherage says I can fan best."

"It is Lone Deatherage—Mr. Bob Patterson—that's his other name. Yes, Ally, I 'spect you'll have lots o' fannin' to do fer 'im."



CHAPTER XXII

ROMEY'S FATHER

"A face of blended pride and pain,
Of mingled pleading and disdain,
With shades of glory and of grief."

Shy, sensitive, overstrung little Romey had never ceased to miss and mourn for the charming, elegant young father between whom and the child there had existed so passionate an attachment.

"He's not like other chil'en," Huldah used to say in excusing him. "I believe I never had hold of a young 'un that had such a memory—fer sorrer. I never seed his mother—she died at Emerald the week before his pa left him here; but I jest imagine Romey was like her."

"Then he isn't like his father?" Daisy asked.

"Yes, he is, too," Huldah replied. "They're both kind o' different from other folks." She sought vainly in her vocabulary for words which would tell the other that Rome Ewing and his son were fastidious, aristocratic, and narrow in their affections.

"Rome Ewing, he was one o' these here fellers



that look like a judge, or the president, whatever he had on or whatever he was a-doin'. He didn't take to many people—but he certainly did love that boy. And you can see how the boy loves him. Never fails to ask me, of a night, 'Aunt Huldy, is my father a-comin' home to-morrow?' I git so sometimes it's right hard to answer, 'cause I ain't heard from Ewing for more'n a year, an' him bein' sorter—sorter wild and reckless, I'm 'feared he might be in trouble."

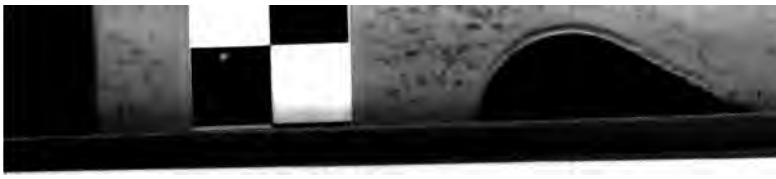
Troy's less merciful account of Rome Ewing was that he was the most dare-devil, heartless and elegant of rascals, with one redeeming virtue—his passionate love for his child.

So it was a great day at the Wagon-Tire House when Romey's father came.

The night before, when the little boy made his usual inquiry, and had received his usual negative rejoinder, Aunt Huldah added:

"Course you always pray fer him; but, Romey, honey, mebby you better put in your pra'r that God's will must be done. Mebby you better not jest beg to have him come home. It looks like you thought God didn't know what's best fer a little boy."

This was an old subject for argument between them. At first the child had refused indignantly —desperately—to ask for anything but that his



father should return the next day. As months went by, the discipline of bereavement, of oft-repeated disappointment, began to tell upon Romey, and the poor little soul modified this demand, dropping to the plea that his father might come soon—soon. Again, as time passed and the adored father came not, Romey made his pathetic concession, and the prayer asked only, "Let him come back to me sometime." This that Aunt Huldah asked, was to the child's mind the end of all things. And now he knelt by his little bed and, tears gathering slowly underneath his eyelids, prayed as she had directed him.

Her tender heart smote her.

"I reckon that's the best thing to do," she debated, as she saw, when her own time for retiring arrived, that the boy had not yet fallen asleep.

He lay wide awake, his big eyes bright with anguish. When he saw that he was noticed, these eyes filled, brimmed, and the proud little creature turned his face silently to the wall, and lay mute and motionless.

Huldah's tears flowed in sympathy.

"I don't want to hurt him," she murmured, "but I'm afraid it's got to come, an' I guess I better be breakin' it a little gradual."

The next day Rome Ewing arrived. Graceful,



elegant, finely dressed, as handsome as ever, if a little thin and white, he got off the stage and came hastily to the door. Huldah ran to meet him and stood so suddenly in the doorway that the man before her had no word ready.

He laid his slender, fine-fingered hand in the hand she held out, and with his eyes fixed beseechingly on her face, just gave a little gasp. With the next breath, he managed to articulate the words, "Romey! Where is he?" shaking like a leaf as he awaited the answer.

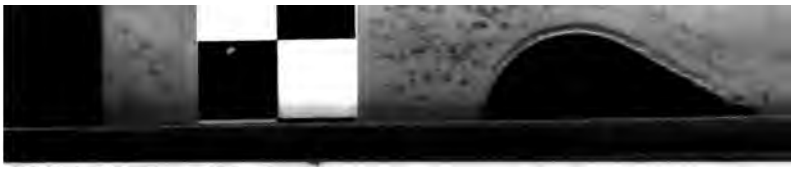
Huldah smiled upon him with the fullest, kindest sympathy.

"I'll hunt him right up," she said. "He ain't in school now, so I can't always tell where to lay my hands on him. Come in." And she drew him into the parlor. "I'll go right straight an' get him."

The man sank into a chair and detained her with a look, which told what the strain had been, and how he had dreaded to ask for the boy, lest the answer be that he was dead.

"Is he well? Has he grown much? Has he forgotten me? You needn't call him till you talk to me a minute. I want to get my breath," he uttered rapidly and with a wan smile.

Huldah turned and regarded him beamingly, her hands on her hips.



"Laws, I know jest how you feel! Yes, he's growed and thrived—never been sick a day. He's awful pretty, a perfect little gentleman, an' bright an'smart about his books—but you'd know he'd be all that. Forgot you? Well, I guess not! I was jest sayin' to Daisy here—oh, excuse me, Mr. Ewing, this is Miss Eleanor Sargent—I was jest sayin' to Miss Sargent this mornin', that I never seen a child remember like Romey does. I believe he thinks of you every hour in the day."

"Here he is, Aunt Huldah!" cried Daisy. "We must all go out and send him in alone."

But they were too late in this kindly intent. There was the patter and rush of small feet at a run, a gasp, and with a long sobbing cry, "*My* father—*my* father—*my* father's come!" Romey was in the man's arms.

They turned away, Aunt Huldah and Daisy—and even Mrs. Patterson, who had left her patient for a moment to see if the good news were true—smiling through tears into one another's faces. They shut the door on that group; father and son locked in a close embrace, the dark head in which the silver threads were beginning to shine, bowed upon the child's tousled curls, the two forms shaken with one emotion.

All day child and man sat together, or wandered hand in hand; so that when, in the after-



noon, Rome Ewing came to talk to Huldah about the care of his son and his plans for the future, he spoke with Romey in his arms, directing some meaning glances above the unconscious head to piece out statements which he preferred not to make before his boy.

"Laws, yes," Aunt Huldah said in the course of their talk; "I could 'a' got rid o' this here boy a plenty o' times. Lots o' folks wanted to take him."

Rome Ewing straightened in his chair and threw up that haughty head of his.

"Wanted to take my son?" he echoed, with a quick flash of his eyes. "But I knew I could trust you, Huldah. I—what did you think, when you didn't hear from me for a year and more?"

"Well," Huldah returned gently, "I thought, of course, that you was either dead or whar' you couldn't write to me."

The red dyed Ewing's face at this simple statement.

"That's it, exactly," he said.

"But I wasn't goin' to give up the boy," Huldah went on. "Romey's got a cur'us disposition in some ways—'tain't like everybody, an' 'tain't everybody 'twould understand him. I aimed to keep him with me till he was growed up, or at least to where he had his princibles well sot."



"God bless you!" said Romey's father, fervently. "If I'd had such bringing up—well, perhaps there wouldn't have been any need for somebody to take care of my son for a year and a half while I was away learning to be a decent father to him. That's where I was, Mrs. Sarvice. In the fourteen months that you didn't hear from me—it was exactly fourteen months—I was in school."

Little Romey reached up a wondering hand and patted his father's face.

"You go and play with those two nice boys I saw at the dinner-table—they're just splendid fellows, I think—go with them for a little while—" the elder advised. "What did you say their names were?—Gess and Tell. Well, those are great names, now aren't they? Go and play with them, young man, for a while. I have something I want to talk to your Aunt Huldah about. I'll be out there in a few minutes to help play."

When the boy was gone he turned once more to Huldah.

"In school," he repeated. "And I've learned my lesson. I was after no good in Mexico—I guess you knew that, Mrs. Sarvice. I got myself mixed up in some pretty shady doings down in South Sonora, and finally their miserable little government there got hold of me, and six others.



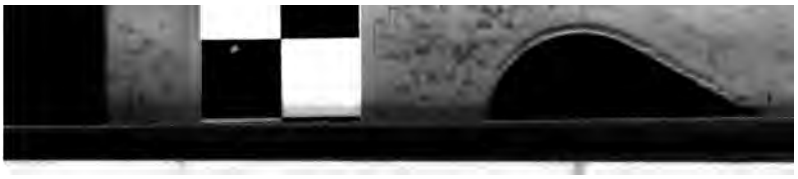
The Lord knows we all deserved hanging—I'm not gainsaying that—but the fellows who got us were no better. They chucked us into a little old adobe prison, up there in the mountains, the seven of us in a room not big enough for two, and there we lay—for nearly thirteen months."

"Tut—tut!" from Aunt Huldah, that little click of the tongue which expresses surprise, or sympathy or deprecation. "Tut—tut!" and she shook her head, looking at the slight, handsome fellow before her with humid eyes.

"Every week or two for months," Ewing went on, "they had spells of debating the question as to whether they'd shoot us or not. It wouldn't have been so bad if they'd gone off to themselves to debate; but they preferred to have us in for the performance, and it was—wearing."

He ran a slim white hand through the dark, silver-threaded curls on his forehead.

"I wonder my hair isn't white," he commented smilingly, as he saw Huldah's glance resting upon it. "Mrs. Sarvice, they had all seven of us out one morning before breakfast, with our hands tied, sitting on a board that was propped up in front of a ditch—a mountain gulley—so that when we were shot we'd roll over into it and save them the trouble of burying us. Then they jabbered and argued and gesticulated—and finally



shot one—one man! That was the mystery of mysteries to me: why they should shoot one and not all seven!"

"Pore souls—oh, pore souls!" said compassionate Huldah.

"Well, so far as I was concerned," Ewing rejoined, "it wasn't more than I needed. It put me in a rage, and it kept me perfectly murderous for months. I would have killed one of those fellows with as little feeling as you'd kill a fly."

Huldah made a quick impulsive movement.

"Don't say that," she remonstrated. "'Tain't that it hurts them; but jest on your own account —don't say that."

"You don't understand quite," Ewing resumed. "I don't mean that I feel so now. That was my school. Those were my lessons—I told you I'd learned them. I was a bad lot, and I had to have some pretty tough lessons. Listen to this one, Mrs. Sarvice—"

Huldah nodded smilingly, and Ewing began:

"We'd been in there nearly six months, and we felt, any of us, willing to die, when they opened the door one night and shoved in some poor fellow they'd wounded and captured. It was dark, but I thought his voice sounded familiar to me, and I tried to find out who he was; but he was delirious. The rest of us did what we could for



him—in the dark that way. We made room and straightened him out, and took a little of the water that they'd allowed us, to keep a wet cloth on his head. One of our men had been shot, and two more had died of fever—right there in that hovel they died—and the rest of us envied them. Well, that left four; and we four worked over this poor soul, and listened to him, all night.

"I thought the captivity, the suffering, the uncertainty as to whether you'd be allowed to live from one day to the next was enough; but that man's talk that night taught me, once for all, whether it pays for a man to be anything else than upright and clean in his life. It went right to my heart to hear him rave about his children. 'My poor boys—my poor boys!' he'd say over and over. 'What'll they be? What'll they come to? Oh—oh—oh, if I could go back! If I could have it to do over again! Poor little fellows!'

"I remember that he seemed to get a new light on some things, just as I had done. He said, 'Why, I've got drunk, just always—whenever I could. I thought 'twas a privilege, and that the men that didn't live as I've lived, made a mistake—that they were afraid to—cowards. I've lied and gambled and fleeced men out of their money—just commonly. That's the way I've



lived. And now, O Lord!' and then he'd plead and beg of God to be merciful. I tell you, Huldah—"

"Yes—yes—yes," agreed his listener. "I know how they talk; I've sat by more than one such death-bed. 'Twould wring your heart to hear it."

"Well, think what it all meant to me!" said Ewing, leaning forward toward his companion. "This man was an ignorant man; he hadn't had my chance in life; and yet—he'd done no worse than I had done—no, not one whit! I promised God then and there that if ever I got out of that hole—and I didn't expect to—the paths that had known my feet should know them no more—I'd come straight here to you and Romey, if I had to walk."

Huldah silently reached out her hand. Ewing met it with a warm clasp, smiled, and went on:

"I didn't have to walk. I've come home rich—almost; but I want to tell you about this man. When dawn came, and we straightened him out, he was dead—and it was Kansas Charlie!"

"Kansas Charlie!" echoed Huldah, springing to her feet, and glancing uneasily through the doorway to where the three little boys were playing happily in the October sunshine.

"Yes," said Ewing, "it was Kansas Charlie.



I couldn't be mistaken. I knew the man well. But then we found papers on him, too, before the Mexicans came in to take the body away. It was Kansas Charlie. I never knew he had any children; did you, Mrs. Sarvice? Was he just delirious? I thought possibly that was it."

Huldah hurried to the door and shut it.

"I made up my mind that night that if he had any children, and I got out and got back home, I'd hunt them up and share with them."

Aunt Huldah came close and whispered:

"Them's his boys, out there—playin' with Romey—Gess and Tell. Them's Kansas Charlie's two sons."

"He left them with you?" inquired Ewing, almost incredulously.

"No; their mother died in my house—in Emerald. She worked for me a while. She was a good gal, and a pretty gal, too, Emily was, 'fore she saw him, an' come to grief an' ruin. I hung onto the chil'en, 'cause I knew Charlie wasn't fit to have 'em. The only time I ever went to him about 'em he threatened to take 'em away, and I was glad to let him alone after that. I don't reckon he meant to be mean about it,"—with hasty kindness for the dead,—"I reckon he did want the boys, an' love 'em. Must 'a' been so, if he thought about 'em the night he died, as you

tell me. An' so he's gone! Well, I've been wonderin' what had become of him. I tried to keep track of him, 'count o' the boys. I was always fearin' that when they'd get up to some size—an' they're mighty likely little fellers—he'd come an' take 'em away from me, an' start 'em along the road to perdition that he traveled hisself."

"Well, he'll never come back to do that," Rome Ewing supplied. "But, Huldah, I'm going to divide what I have with those boys. I don't want to take them away from you, either; I don't think that would be fair to them—or to you."

"Oh, don't be thinkin' 'bout what's fair to me," Huldah put in cheerfully. "Whatever's best fer the chil'en, is fair to me."

"Well, we won't have any trouble arranging it," he said, smiling. "You can mother them, and I'll foot the bills—school, current expenses—and later college, or business, or any special training they want or seem fitted for. And maybe you'll like to have me to consult with—as these are boys, and not girls. I'm going to live in Texas, myself."

Huldah beamed upon him.

"I couldn't 'a' planned out anything, an' ast fer it—jest somethin' the way I'd like it the very best—that would 'a' suited me like that will," she said.



Ewing rose, and moved toward the door leading to the back porch, whence he heard the children's murmuring voices. But he stopped with his hand upon the knob, turned back, and taking Huldah's hand drew her to a chair, sitting down close beside her.

"But you don't know yet—" he said, "I haven't told you yet—what it was that made the deep—the ineffaceable—impression upon me, what it was that seemed to me to mark me out for something special, something apart from other men; that left me with a sense of not belonging to myself alone, but to Him—or That—which had brought me through alive. Aunt Huldah, it was this: when thirteen months and more had gone past, in that hideous hole, that living grave; when a little side-revolution took place up there in the hills, and the 'other fellows' in a burst of humanity came to open that door, who do you suppose walked out of it? Who do you suppose it was that had been saved alive where every one else had succumbed—had given up the struggle and yielded to fever or despair and died?"

Rome Ewing leaned forward where he sat, his pale, delicate face lighted with intense earnestness, his eyes, deep and questioning, so like the little Romey's eyes, fixed burningly upon Huldah's face.



"Huldah, it was I—it was no other soul but I —I walked alone out of that loathsome trap, carrying with me—and I have carried it every minute since—this feeling of belonging to something greater and better than myself, and owing something good—something noble—to the preserving Power."

Huldah's wisdom counseled her to be silent. She only nodded her head, with a look of perfect sympathy.

"I've often wondered—I told you those fellows had spells of debating the wholesale murder of us. They shot one of us in the early days of our imprisonment; Kansas Charlie died the same night they threw him in there like a wounded dog; and after that they took two other fellows—the most able-bodied of the whole seven of us—they took them out and sent them, I thought, up into the mountains, to the mines, as slaves. That left—at the end of nearly twelve months—one poor wretch—with me. I tell you, I clung to him; he was the last shred of humanity left to me. I had to see him die of fever, like the two others that had gone. It was then the feeling began to come over me that I was being saved—held in the hollow of a Hand—for something—for something—"



Ewing's voice dropped into silence for a moment. Then he spoke again:

"And I began to question, 'Why? For what?' and to wonder what silent, invincible power it was that had set a guard about me, what shield it was that was over my head so that no deadly thing could seem to reach my life. That's just the way I felt, Huldah—and I do yet. I wonder—"

"Maybe it was a little child's prayers," said Huldah, softly. "They're clean, you know, Ewing. The Lord, He makes great account of 'em."

"Romey!" ejaculated Romey's father. "You taught him—"

"I teach all my chil'en to pray," returned Huldah, simply. "But I never seen nothin' like what Romey's been about you—never. His little heart was set, beyond anything I ever knowed in a child, on his father; he begged God every night—and mostly with tears—to send his father home to him safe; an' as I told you at first, I don't believe there was a hour of the day when he didn't think of you. Look' like his little life was jest one long prayer. He made out to God that his need fer you was 'most beyond what he could bear—and they was truth in it, you know. Romey needs some one to understand him—to sort o' make a j'inin' 'twixt him an' the world in gen-



Huldah looked out at father and son, sitting in the swing together, with Gess and Fell squatted cowboy fashion at their feet. PAGE 287





eral; an' I don't know of any one that could do it —but you. Looks to me like he made it out that-away to God."

"God bless my boy!" murmured the man. "And God bless you, Huldah Sarvice, who kept him for me."

"I dunno as I ort to tell you sad things," hesitated Huldah. "An' yit, now it's past an' gone, an' all turned out well, 'tain't sad neither;" and she related to Ewing the incident of the previous night.

Long before she finished he was openly wiping his eyes, and with the last word he rose.

"Thank you for telling me," he said. "I—it's done me good—but I must get my hands on him —I must have the dear little soul in my arms."

Huldah looked out at father and son, sitting in the swing together, with Gess and Tell squatted cowboy fashion at their feet.

"I say, what took care o' him!" she murmured, with a whispered laugh.



CHAPTER XXIII

POOR TROY GILBERT!

"She was but a child, a child,
And I a man grown;
Sweet she was, and fresh, and wild,
And,—I thought,—my own."

There came a time when Daisy laid hold of her life like other people. Her sweet little face was not less sweet, but it became more resolute and composed. She answered more questions than she asked; and she showed herself a girl of character and strength as well as sweetness.

Huldah watched all this with great satisfaction. She felt sure that it would not be a good thing for Troy Gilbert to give his heart and his life into the keeping of a woman who was childish and dependent, however endearing she might be.

The boarders at the Wagon-Tire House showed a tendency nowadays to linger in its parlor; but one evening when they all chanced to be gone, and when Mrs. Patterson had the children—now reduced to three in number—with her at the Sunday-school, practising for a special



occasion, Daisy sat with Gilbert and Huldah in the little parlor and told them clearly just how she came to Blowout.

"It was so terrible to me, for a long time, and so mixed with the dreadful images of my delirium, that I couldn't bear to talk about it; but I want to explain to both of you, before I go away —and I expect I'll have to be looking about soon, to take up the threads of my life and do something again."

"I don't see why you should be looking about," Troy said half-resentfully. "The ranch was all paid for, and I'm having the proper proof made; it will come to you. If you mean going back to Ohio, why, I think that would be a great mistake."

Daisy smiled a little, and took Huldah's hand, which she was very fond of holding.

"I don't know whether I mean Ohio, or somewhere else; I feel as though I had been out of the lists long enough now. But never mind that, this evening. I was going to tell you about my coming here to—to you; about that day. Well, there really were two men—I kept having all sorts of crazy notions about two, afterward; but I know that it did begin with there being two.

"I had only been at the ranch a day, and it was all very strange to me. This first night the



men came, and the shooting began while I was in my room, reading. I ran out into the main room, and there these two men were shooting at my father. He fell; they turned and saw me and cried out. They seemed surprised to see me there; and when I ran back into my room they ran after me. I saw them following, and I fastened the door and went on through into the kitchen. Just as I stepped in there, the two came in at a door opposite me. I ran into my own room again, and pulled some furniture against one of the doors that had no lock.

"That was the beginning of my delirium, as I know now. I suppose the men really left then; but it seemed to me that they were running in and out of the house all night, and I was trying to get away from them. As soon as it was gray in the morning, I packed my bag and crept out to the road and waited for the stage. I had come to the ranch on the stage, you know; and when I wanted to get away, of course I thought of it. I didn't try to take any particular stage, or go in any particular direction. There were two men in the stage when it came, and they frightened me fearfully. I thought they were the same men. I was going to run away from them; but then it seemed to me that I heard the two men behind me on horses, so I got into the stage."



"Pore little bird!" murmured Huldah, lovingly; and her eyes were full of tears.

"After that, it seemed to me that it was years and years that we drove and drove and drove. I was so frightened every minute. Part of the time I thought the stage was a boat, and the grass was water, and that we were sailing. I think the men tried to talk to me a little; but I suppose they must have seen how it terrified me, for they stopped. After a while, I noticed what they were saying to each other. They were talking about Mr. Gilbert, but they called him just Gilbert; and it seemed to me that it was some one I knew. They said again and again that he wasn't afraid of anything; and in my terror I felt that if I could only get to him, he would take care of me."

Gilbert's handsome, frank face was pale with feeling, his eloquent eyes fastened upon her in a passion of tenderness and longing. It almost seemed as though he would speak; but he checked his impulse, reached across and patted her little hands reassuringly, instead, and she, smiling back to his smile, went on:

"I kept being more and more terrified at those men, till I got out of the stage and ran away, and came here, asking every one for Gilbert."

"How long, do you take it, it lasted, honey? How soon, as you remember things—did you be-



gin to come to yourself a little?" Aunt Huldah asked.

"A good deal sooner than you folks think," Daisy answered, flushing rosily. "I began to know, as soon as I was able to understand what you said to me, that I hadn't really any right to claim so much of Mr. Gilbert's time and attention. I just felt wilful and childish about it, as sick people do. I thought if I kept saying over and over that I had always known him, and that I needed him because he wasn't afraid and I was, it would make it all right."

The three laughed happily together, looking at one another.

"Well, it sure didn't need any making all right," Troy remarked. "It may have been just an accident, your coming here asking for me, but —" he shook his head; "well, I believe it's one of the accidents that ought to be called—a—"

"A Providence," supplied Huldah; and immediately her acute ears heard a call from the old woman in the kitchen. Nobody else could hear it—in fact old Sairey had gone over to her daughter's, and the three were alone in the house; but the expression of Troy Gilbert's eyes said to wise Aunt Huldah that her absence would be more valuable to the two young people just at that moment than her presence.



"You're not going away," Troy began as soon as they were alone. "They've got more girls in Ohio than we have out here. You don't want to go back there."

Daisy dimpled and laughed. She had a saucy little way of her own since health and strength had returned to her.

"I have my living to earn," she explained. "There may be more girls in Ohio, but you see there are more things for girls to do there, too. Do you want me to get a job as a cowboy?"

"Why, honey," began Troy, frankly and at once, as was his wont, "it's just like this, you know. Maybe I have mixed up a good deal of what you said when you were out of your head with what you really meant; but I supposed that when you got well we'd be married. I—of course you know that I love you—that you are—are—that my heart's just wrapped up in you. I know you must know this; and I've been believing that you, too—you thought a good deal of me."

He looked at her fearlessly, directly, with those honest eyes of his. The red flooded her face, and she gazed down at her trembling fingers in distress.

"I never saw anybody else that I wanted to marry," he went on softly. "Aunt Huldy will tell you all about me. She pretty near raised me.



I think she'll give me a good name—" there was a little twinge as Troy thought about the saloon, but he went on bravely—"I think she'll give me a good name; and I know you'd take her word. What's the matter, sweetheart? Don't you love me—any—at all?"—in a voice of pained incredulity. The question came because Daisy had turned her head quite aside, and was pulling away the hand he held.

"No, no," she murmured. "Don't. I wanted to—to explain, that—that I can't."

"Is it the saloon?" asked Troy, with his usual candor. "I know that ain't a very tony business; but I don't drink a drop; even Aunt Huldah will say that for me. Honey, it takes a pretty good man to keep a saloon in Texas. You've got to be a fellow that's not afraid of anything," and at the phrase "not afraid", Daisy turned a face with laughter and tears in it toward him.

"Not afraid!" she echoed. "That was the first thing I heard said about you; and I—and I—I liked you, from that very moment."

"What is it then, darling? If it is the saloon, why, I'll quit it. I've been mighty proud of my place, and I've made a good deal of money there; but I'll do or be anything that you want me to. I've got a ranch of my own. I'm solid with the boys here, the boys all over Wild Horse

County—all over the district. They've made me sheriff of Wild Horse County. They'd send me to Congress from this district, if I wanted it. Would that please you, dearie? Would that do me any good with you?'—very wistfully.

"Oh, don't!" answered the girl, in a choking voice. "You are good enough for me, whatever you do. You make me feel as if I had deceived you; but indeed I never meant to. There's somebody—"

There fell a long silence. Troy leaned back in his chair. His eyes—the eyes of a child, struck, it knows not why—fell away from her face.

"There's somebody else!" he echoed blankly. "Why, how could there be anybody else?" and his look questioned the walls, in a helpless sort of protest and interrogatory. "It always seemed to me—I felt as if you just belonged to me, you know, from the very first minute."

Daisy put her head down on the arm of her chair and sobbed softly. But Troy Gilbert was an optimist. "There—there, don't cry," he soothed, stroking her hair back, as he had done in those early days when all her comfort came from him. "I'll bet you don't like him as well as you do me. And if you don't, why, you needn't have him. Is it—" he hesitated, but



Daisy lifted her tear-stained face and seemed to encourage him—"is it some fellow back in Ohio?"

She dried her eyes and nodded.

"It is a young man I was at school with," she whispered. "We were in the same class at college; but when I came out here he was studying divinity."

"Studying—what?" asked Gilbert, a little taken back.

"He is a preacher—or he is to be a preacher," Daisy amended meekly. "The last time I heard from him, he was expecting to be ordained. That is some time ago now, and I suppose he has a church. He thought we would be married as soon as his plans were settled. I feel that I have promised him. Oh, Gilbert!" dropping into the old address which had become so dear and familiar during her illness, "oh, Gilbert, I hope that you—I don't—but I have promised—and—"

"A preacher," repeated Gilbert, gently and reverently. "Well, that lays over my play, doesn't it, honey? I've got a pretty big bunch of cattle and a fine ranch. I've always made plenty of money; I could give you whatever you want, in reason. Folks seem to like me pretty well. I told you the boys would send me to Congress—and I believe they'd do it—I believe it could be done—in time, you know, and doin' things



right. But—a preacher! No, if you want a preacher, dearie girl, I—I reckon I'm not in it."

Daisy's little face looked so woebegone when Gilbert rose to bid her good-by, that he broke out, with sudden hope:

"Would you rather have me after all, honey?"

She longed so much to tell him how greatly rather; but Daisy had had Puritan upbringing; there was something this little girl held above her own happiness. And she only said:

"I've given my promise. I think people should keep their promises. He's coming out to see me. He may be here almost any day now, and I'm afraid—I'm afraid that he wants me to be married and go back with him."

"Oh," said Gilbert, in a changed voice, and catching his breath sharply; "I'm glad I talked to you about it beforehand. I'm glad it didn't come on me sudden, just seeing him here, and all that, you know."

And so he left her; and she watched him miserably as long as he was in sight.



CHAPTER XXIV

THE BRIMMING CUP

"And can you love me still, whom
another hath forsook?"

After that interview, Daisy carried so miserable a face that Aunt Huldah, too wise to ask her confidence, contrived many opportunities to be alone with her.

And at last one day, when they were making beds together, Daisy burst out with the whole story.

She told it in such a rush, with such a flood of remorse and pity for Troy, that Huldah could make neither head nor tail of it.

Finally, "So ye ain't a-goin' to have him," she remarked ruefully. "I'm awful sorry. Gilbert he's jest one o' the best boys 'at ever was; but he needs—well, I was foolish enough to think that he only needed you. I reckon I must 'a' been mistaken, or you'd 'a' loved him an' had him."

"Oh, I do—I do love him!" Daisy cried, sitting down on the edge of the bed they were then



spreading, and hiding her face in her hands. "I can't bear to hear you say that he needs me. I—it makes me uncertain about my real duty." And she told Aunt Huldah about the suitor—the man to whom she felt that she was engaged, and who was coming for her soon.

"I didn't know but maybe 'twas the saloon," Huldah said bluntly. "You wouldn't marry a man that run a saloon, would you, Daisy?"

"He said he'd give that up. He said he'd do or be anything that I wanted him to," explained the girl, pitifully.

"He did?" Huldah rejoined. "Well, that was good. I'd ruther he'd give it up for your sake than not to give it up at all—though I wish't he'd jest 'a' give it up 'cause he knows he ort to. Well, they's some good comes out o' even sad things. So Troy is a-goin' to give up keepin' a saloon!"

"I told him it wasn't that. I told him that he would be—I wanted to tell him that he would be the man I loved, whatever he did. I was hurting his feelings so, Aunt Huldah, that I couldn't bear to say that."

"Oh, honey—honey—honey! Ef that ain't jest like a child! You love Troy, an' you see him down in the pit, where he ain't no business to be, an' you won't reach a hand to help him out!"

"But, Aunt Huldah, didn't I tell you that I hurt



his feelings dreadfully? that I had to refuse him? that I'm going to marry somebody else?"

"Oh, baby-child! Can't you love him an' be kind to him an' give him a helpin' hand along the way 'at God wants him to walk, even if you are goin' to marry somebody else? I wish't you'd a-told Gib the honest truth about the matter. It's most as important as marryin' an' givin' in marriage—a man's business is."

Daisy dried her eyes soberly.

"Yes, Aunt Huldah, I see what you mean. 'After all, it may be a small thing in—in Mr. Gilbert's life whether I said yes or no to him in answer to this question. But the other matter is a great thing; and if I'm a true and loving friend to him—God knows I am—I am—I am! —if I am really his friend and have his interest at heart, why, I ought to speak to him. As my Quaker grandmother used to say, 'I ought to bear testimony.' I will, Aunt Huldah. Whatever comes, I will do as you say in this matter."

A week after, Gilbert went to Emerald on some sheriff's business. When he entered the Wagon-Tire House on his return, he found it very quiet. Mrs. Patterson was sitting with her husband, who was creeping back to life, drawn thither and sustained and heartened by the wife's passionate determination and Aunt Huldah's unwavering



faith and robust good-cheer. The children—Gess and Tell and Ally—had gone to play far over on Buffalo Flats. It was Huldah who came to Troy from the region of the kitchen, greeted him, placed him at one end of the long table, and brought in his cold lunch—and as he later learned, Daisy was in the parlor.

"I did a mighty foolish thing to-day," Troy began. "At least, most people would say it was foolish. You won't. I had an offer from Bart Upsher for the Roundup, and I refused to sell it to him. He offered all it was worth—and a little more; but I refused to sell it to him."

"An' you think I'll say that wasn't foolish, do you?" Huldah inquired.

"No, that ain't the part," Troy answered easily. "I knew Bart was buying for those Kelley brothers—they're worse than Kansas Charlie. I'll bet you don't want those Kelleys running the sort of place he did, even to get me out of the saloon business—now do you, Aunt Huldy?"

"It's a hard choice," returned Huldah, a little bruskly for her. "I don't know as I could really say that I want anything about who keeps saloons. It's a hard choice."

"Well, that isn't all. I have sold the Roundup. I sold it to Dutch John, over at Emerald. I reckon he comes as near to running a decent sa-



loon as any man you'll get. He has his Dutch notions about it; and he talks like he might move the place, anyhow."

Huldah's face was all alight.

"You sold it—you're out of it? Oh, Gib, I'll bet you don't know—you hain't any idee how glad I am!" Tears were running down her wrinkled cheeks, and Gilbert looked at them with emotion.

"God bless you, Aunt Huldy. You're always a sight more interested in what is coming to somebody else than in any good for yourself."

He said it without realizing—what few of us do realize—that God did bless her because of this.

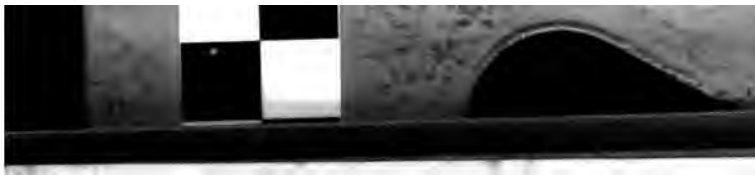
"Gib," began Huldah, and then broke off. "She's in the parlor—Daisy is," she added with apparent irrelevance.

Gilbert nodded gravely above his cup of coffee and plate of cold biscuit. A shadow dropped over his handsome face. That wound was yet so new that the slightest touch upon it hurt.

There seemed to be something on Aunt Huldah's mind. She fidgeted and dropped things, and smiled at inopportune places. Finally it came out.

"Her beau's been here," she said, with a little nod toward the parlor.

Gilbert did not ask whose beau. A sort of



shiver went over him; he set his lips more firmly, and then inquired, "Is he gone?"

"Yes. He come about noon,—on the stage, with Billy Bascom. He went on with the four o'clock to Emerald. You might 'a' passed him. Bard was his name. Somehow, I didn't take to him greatly."

Gilbert thanked her with a glance.

"When is he coming back?" he asked presently, and his voice was husky.

"I don't believe I know. You'd better ask Daisy. I told you she was in the parlor." Huldah inspected a teaspoon narrowly, stealing curious, half-sheepish side-glances at her companion, and finished: "She's been right cast down."

"Because he's gone," said Gilbert, rising suddenly. "No, thank you, Aunt Huldy. I couldn't eat any more. Thank you, I've had plenty."

"Well, I don't know," Huldah repeated. "She's in the parlor, Daisy is."

Gilbert turned.

"Of course, I know you wouldn't blame her," he said, "but I wouldn't want any one to, ever. I don't want her to blame herself—like she did the last time we talked together. She's got a right to know what she wants. She don't have to want me, you know, Aunt Huldy, just because I want her—so—" with a gulp which was very like a



sob—"so bad;" and Gilbert turned and stared unseeingly through the door.

Huldah looked distressed.

"Gib," she said, "did I fergit to tell you that Daisy was in the parlor?"

Gilbert came around the table to where his old friend sat.

"You're sorry for me, ain't you, Aunt Huldy?" he said gently. "Well, you needn't to be. I love the little girl well enough to want her to have the best that's going; and if that man is a better fellow than I am, why—I'm glad."

The woman's eyes were full of tears. She reached up and got the hand that Gilbert had laid on her shoulder, and said with a half-sob:

"Oh, Gib! I'm so glad you give up the saloon, before you went in to talk to Daisy—'cause you know I told you she was in the parlor."

The house was very quiet. There was not one soul in it but the wounded man, his wife, and their three selves. Gilbert stooped, looked long and intently into the kind face, his own countenance pale and strained, then startled, questioning, wondering, and without a word, but with only a quick choking breath and a pressure of the hand that fairly made Huldah jump, he turned and walked into the little parlor.

Somebody, who was sitting all alone by the



one small window over at the farther side of the room, got up and came to him crying, "Gilbert! Gilbert!"—it was the old name she had given him at first—"I want Gilbert!"

She finished her sentence in his arms.

"Where is he?" asked Troy, with his lips against her hair. "Where is that other fellow?"

"He just came to say he didn't want me, Gilbert," she answered between laughing and crying. "He'd heard a very high-colored account of—about father and the boys, and the trouble out here. He thinks my family would be a disgrace to him. Oh," as Gilbert made to interrupt, a look of utter incredulity upon his face, "oh, I admit, that isn't just what he said,—no, he didn't say any of it right out,—but that's what he meant. And do you want a girl that has just been rejected?"

Oh, did he? In all his strong, self-sufficient young life, Troy had never wanted anything so much.

"And that fellow was a preacher!" he said wonderingly, after the first rapture of their explanations had calmed somewhat. "And you sent him away—oh, you needn't talk to me about any man giving you up of himself. No—no; you didn't like his talk—maybe it was because you loved me, darling—and you sent him away—him, a preacher!"



"No, he wasn't. He gave up his church before he gave up me; he's gone into politics. Some big interest—a railroad or something of the kind—is going to get him into the state legislature," Daisy answered smilingly. "I think he needs Aunt Huldah to look after him—but he wouldn't stay and be looked after."

Huldah, passing the door, was called in and told the joyful news.

"I don't know 's I ever had anything to make me quite so happy," she said, looking from one young face to the other, recklessly wiping her eyes on the first "tidy" that came to her hand.

"He promised to make me a congressman's wife, Aunt Huldah. What do you think of that?" Daisy queried, laughing.

"But he give up the saloon when he thought he wasn't goin' to git you—he give it up anyhow, an' not fer the sake of a reward," Huldah repeated, with jealous dwelling upon the outcome that had been so longed for. "I don't know which I feel the happiest about. But I tell you, Daisy, you've got a better man than as ef he had jest give it up fer your sake."



CHAPTER XXV

CONCLUSION

"Where go the children? Traveling! Traveling!
Where go the children, traveling ahead?
* * * * * * * *
Some go to singing less; some go to list'ning;
Some go to thinking over ever-nobler themes;
Some go an hungered, but ever bravely whistling,
Turning never home again only in their dreams!"

Life, to adopt Huldah's figure of speech, is a winding road—a road upon which we all travel. And we are always saying to ourselves, "Around this turn is happiness. Beyond that bend I shall find rest. If I can but hold the pace for another mile, I shall be in the country of my desire."

So we travel, some of us comfortably enough, some in the footsore misery of imminent breakdown; but we always travel—we never sojourn. Not even if that happiness, that rest, or that delectable land could lie where we think them (and they never can) could we pause with them.

We have seen Huldah's little caravan move over a portion of that way which was appointed

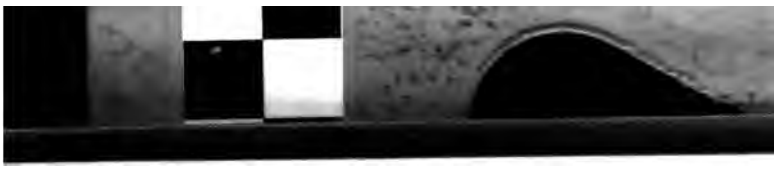


to it. We have seen them bearing with fortitude the load of sorrows which come to all severally; wearing their joys as wings upon their feet; meeting the rain, loving the dusty benison of the sun, helping one another, and passing on, each to his appointed place.

During its journeying, the band shifted and changed; the heads about Huldah's knees were sometimes more fair, and sometimes more dark, as its component integers varied. But it was always stepping ahead; its leader with her weather-beaten face and calm, far-seeing eyes set ever forward, and the patter of little feet in the dust about her.

The passing of a caravan it is; and between a sleep and a sleep is it scattered, so that no man may reassemble it,—as soon think to fashion the dust of the road to the print of the feet that yesterday went by.

Even Blowout is Blowout no more. When the railroad finally came through, the town began that mad growth which we have learned to call a "boom". Within a year, the name was felt to be out of harmony with its present aims and destiny. A mass-meeting of its citizens renamed it; but not in this chronicle will be set down what "ville" or "burg" they pitched upon as most ex-



pressive of the amended and—may one say, the expurgated?—aims of the town.

It was after the place had become a city, with the astonishing suddenness known to the West, that Huldah Sarvice was urged for the position of police matron. Gilbert was doing well; his fortunes had waxed with those of the town. He offered Aunt Huldah a home in his house, or a house of her own, if that arrangement would allow her to feel more independent. Gess and Tell were both at work—neither boy cared for a profession, and they were in the same railway shop, planning to be president and vice-president of the road, respectively, in a few years, and meantime earning incomes which would make a young doctor or lawyer in his first year green with envy.

Sissy—Narcissa Carter—justified Huldah's judgment that she needed spoiling. The atmosphere of luxury and demonstrative affection into which she was transplanted developed her marvelously. She is the comfort of Mrs. Carter's life; and, as that lady writes to Huldah, the light of her eyes as well.

Huldah's persistent optimism in her judgment of the baby's father proved to be wise. Several years after Mrs. Carter took the baby, the two boys, his brothers, struggled back to Blowout,



their father having died of fever; and the baby's adoptive mother was for a time dreadfully frightened, fearing she should lose him. She flew, of course, to Huldah for counsel, and was advised not to keep the baby's birth a secret from himself, nor from any one, but to do what she could for his brothers, who were now nearly grown men, and to teach the child to regard them as relatives.

When once she had been able to take this view of the matter, she found the boys creditable and promising young fellows. She did not desire to make them members of her family; but she has been a good friend to them, and she feels that the baby will never be ashamed of his brothers.

Lone Deatherage, Lone no more, lives on the ranch near Blowout—or what was Blowout. The reunited couple seem anxious to wipe out the memory of those years of estrangement, a little timid of their new happiness, and very resolute not again to endanger it. Indeed, Mrs. Patterson wore for a time an air of being willing that her husband should indulge in an occasional spree, so that she might prove how forgiving her love had become. But appetite for drink had permanently left him in that last terrible illness through which he struggled under her ministrations, and those of Aunt Huldah, in the Wagon-



Tire House. He is a contented man, happy in wife and children; there is probably as little danger of his relapsing as of Aunt Huldah herself taking to such courses—at least that is what she says about it.

The two fluttered like a pair of nesting birds about the forlorn little adobe on the L Bar D ranch, cleansing, repairing, enlarging, improving. Childless throughout all their early and inharmonious married years, the little ones came tumbling in now, as though to make up arrears.

When Alabama—the little Ally—was fifteen, possessed of endless charm, abandon and humanity, she began to bring home from every outing an embarrassing catch of queer fish for Aunt Huldah to classify,—at least, they would have been embarrassing to anybody on earth but Aunt Huldah.

And Ally showed emotional liability to go on the stage—or into a convent.

"I'll ask you for a home for Ally," Huldah said, discussing with Troy the proposed office and the disposition of her own affairs in case she undertook it. "I can't have the child with me—she's as good as gold, keen to go right in and help, and she's got the ability to do it, the understandin' o' men an' women,—but I can't have it. I can trust her to you and Daisy. She's



got the makin' of a mighty fine woman in her, and Daisy'll know how to bring it out."

Troy Gilbert pushed back from his desk and regarded his old friend humorously. He was mayor now, and Huldah counted upon him to create this office which a woman's club had described and proposed to her, and to place her in it. The years had been good to Troy. He had gained in strength without losing in fineness; indeed, it was a chastened Troy Gilbert who faced Huldah and smiled upon her.

She was as little changed as a hill, a rock, or any part of a natural landscape is changed by the passing years. Her face was perhaps a little browner, her hair grayer; but the same incongruity was apparent between her gray hair and her head-gear, her laugh and her evident years, that had always been among the hostile and discordant elements of her outward structure.

The man before her looked at her with love.

"Aunt Huldah," he said, "I've had it in my mind for some time to offer you an Orphans' Home to keep. Want it? Wouldn't it suit you?"

Huldah hesitated, and Troy, leaning forward, reading her face, laughed.

"Yes—yes, I know; you want to get back among the old bums and toughs—that nobody else'll touch with a ten-foot pole."



"That's right! I do—I been jest pinin' 'cause everybody 'bout here's so respectable!" retorted Huldah, with a twinkling eye.

"Funny," mused Troy, in pretended wonder. "You did your best to make good citizens of us all—I shouldn't have been much without you, Aunt Huldah—and when we behave ourselves pretty well, you up and desert us."

"You know how it is, Gib," coaxed the woman. "You said yourself, just now, that nobody else'd touch 'em with a ten-foot pole. They's lots o' good women that'll jump at the chance to run your Orphants' Home. But these others—" the strong voice vibrated, broke and sank into silence.

"Yes, I do know," rejoined Gilbert, with profound emotion. "No other woman wants to do—will do—what you choose. It's the dead dog and the pearls over again, Aunt Huldah. I reckon you'd hardly believe how many times I've thought of that story of yours when I was inclined to judge some fellow creature harshly."

Huldah nodded. She knew—she had observed—how Troy's besetting sin of self-righteousness diminished with years.

"You're a good man, Gib," she said. "I wish't they was more like ye to deal with God's unfortunates."

"They are dead dogs—most of the riff-raff in



the station-house of a town like this," he went on; "but it'll do 'em good, if anything can, to have Aunt Huldah Sarvice to remind 'em that even a dead dog has teeth like pearls."

And the wagon-tire—that shining hoop which had hung outside so many of Huldah's dwelling places, upon which little hands had been sent to beat, upon which Huldah herself had beaten, as she said, to summon so many and such various partakers about her board—what became of the wagon-tire?

In the cheery little sitting-room at headquarters, assigned to the police matron, the big hoop hangs upon the wall. Its spike, scoured to silver brightness, hangs unused below it. Inside its circle—emblem of eternity, of love, and of all manner of perfection—Huldah has grouped the pictures of her children. They are so many that even its considerable space is crowded. Troy and Daisy, with their children, in the center; Narcissa, with the baby on her knee; beside them, Alabama, "in costume," looking very dangerous as Lady Macbeth, and yet showing possibilities of the mercurial Ally, who, in another portrait, laughs from behind a fan; Gess and Tell taken together (would Gess and Tell ever be taken any other way?) fine, tall young men, looking enough



like their father, Kansas Charlie, to cause his old friends to remark upon it.

"Kansas Charlie," says Aunt Huldah, reminiscently, "he had the makin' of a very fine man—course he had, or he couldn't 'a' been as bad as he was. Now Gess and Tell, they've got the same snap an' go to 'em, an' they're aimed right. They'll be jest two Kansas Charlies—like he *might* 'a' been."

The portrait of Romance Ewing, the younger, was made in Paris, and bears the name of a celebrated French photographer. He and his father are abroad, while his education is being finished; but neither of them forgets Aunt Huldah or Gess and Tell.

Minnie Barringer's baby and a dozen faces unknown to our little history, of children who came and went either before or after the time of this brief glimpse of Huldah,—sojourning under her roof, partaking of her care and bounty, and who now send back the love she gave them in unstinted measure,—these round out the circle.

What memories come to the silent and motionless wagon-tire, who can guess? No longer rolling across the plain, or climbing the hill; grinding over sand and stone, splashing through water and weed; no longer—faithful and will-



ing herald of hospitality and good-cheer—uttering bell-like notes to assemble her friends about her board; it hangs there—a memory—and binds in its circumference, for Huldah Sarvice, the relics of that busy little world that was once the Wagon-Tire House.

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